

TURTLE AMULET

CONCEPT

Turtle Amulet, an example of a beaded bag of the Plains Indians, is an object of personal identification that employs symbolism through the use of animal shapes, colors, and geometric designs. Studying the traditions and meaning of objects created by the Native Americans enhances our own connection with the world and its affects on our identity.



Turtle Amulet, Cheyenne, 19th century, Gift of General M.F. Force, 1894.102

BACKGROUND

The Cheyenne Indians, one of the most notable of the western tribes, inhabited the Great Plains area of the country. Toward the end of the seventeenth century, they migrated westward, settling along the Red River where it forms the border between the Dakotas and Minnesota. Until the introduction of the horse in 1760 by the Spanish, the life of the Cheyenne was based purely on agriculture, growing crops such as corn, beans, and squash. The horse changed their sedentary lifestyle to one that became seminomadic. The Cheyenne were now able to follow the bison herds that were abundant on the Great Plains. The bison provided a rich food

source and its by-products, primarily its hide and bone, provided shelter and clothing to the tribal community. By 1830, sufficiently equipped with horses, the Cheyenne completely abandoned a village life based in farming for a nomadic life of hunting. So successful was this way of life, the Plains soon became a refuge area for various tribes pressured out of their previous territories by white settlers.

In the Cheyenne tribe, men distinguished themselves as warriors and hunters, and women distinguished themselves as gatherers, food preparers, and makers of various domestic implements, such as storage containers and clothing. Cheyenne

CRITICAL THINKING

What has been saved for you from the time you were born?

Who saved these keepsakes from your birth? Where are they stored?

Write a brief paragraph about the significance of your birth or baby keepsakes.

What family traditions have helped to shape your identity?

What objects of belief have been present in your home?



VOCABULARY

tradition

amulet

seed bead

symbolism

myth

buckskin

quill

tribe

implements

natal charm

medicine bundle

nomads

preserve

sinew

wampum

rawhide

culture

children were highly valued by their parents and the tribe. From birth, their lives were made as comfortable as possible. The female relatives of the mother in a special birth lodge or the home tipi attended to their birth. As soon as the baby was born, its umbilical cord was cut and tied. When it dried and fell off, it was carefully prepared by the mother and wrapped in a soft material, like buffalo hair. The bundle was then sewn into a buckskin bag or amulet that was carefully decorated in quillwork or beads. This attention to detail was to ensure a long and healthy life. The bag was then kept and protected by the child well into their adult life. According to the Cheyenne, the naval contains the essence of a child's personality, and the child who does not care for this bag or amulet will be disobedient or bad. These amulets were often hung above the cradle while the children were infants and then pinned to their clothing until they reached puberty.

"The Museum's *Turtle Amulet* is a example of the sort of buckskin bag or amulet that would have contained a Cheyenne child's umbilical cord. It is constructed of two pieces of tanned deerskin that have been sewn together. Prior to sewing the two pieces of hide together, the top portion was adorned with beadwork. The beaded decoration consists of small, translucent blue seed beads that were attached using the lazy stitch method. Yellow translucent beads form the details of the turtle such as the eyes, the rectangular shapes on the

back allude to the shell, and the red-dyed horsehair fringes represent appendages. Many Plains Indian peoples shared a creation myth whereby the first human life was carried on the back of a turtle out of the water-covered world, and it was upon the back of the turtle that dry land was subsequently created. As a result, the turtle is closely related the "mother earth." Amulets for girls were made in the form of the turtle because of the significant role of the turtle in women's medicine—it was thought to protect them from the dangers of childbearing and to have power over women's reproductive functions."¹

Soft skinned bags were also used to hold necklaces, paints, beads, bullets, tobacco, and other items of value. They were decorated in the beginning with porcupine quills dyed using berries and nuts. The women in the quilling societies then put the quills in their mouths and softened them with their saliva. They also flattened them by pulling them through their teeth. This early form of hide decoration continued through the nineteenth century; however, it was quickly replaced with trade beads or seed beads, which were obtained by the Plains tribes through trade. The stitch that was commonly used was the lazy stitch. This stitch used five to seven beads strung onto thread and stitched onto the hide in rows. This allowed the women to cover large areas in a short amount of time.

¹Cincinnati Art Museum, *Object of the Month: Turtle Amulet*. June 1995

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

LANGUAGE ARTS

Native Americans had many legends that explained the mysteries of nature and the behavior of animals. These stories gave creative answers to questions such as how the mountains were made, why the sun and moon live in the sky, and how a dog got his tail. Write a short legend about an animal that interests you. Explain in a creative way about its special behavior and its physical characteristics.

SOCIAL STUDIES

Research other tribes that lived in the Great Plains. How are their customs the same or different? Create a timeline starting in the 1600s through today, and chart events that happened in the Plains region to events in other areas of the Americas, Great Britain, and other significant places around the world.

SCIENCE

How did Native Americans preserve food? What foods were readily available on the Great Plains? How were foods, such as the prairie turnip, harvested? What nutritional values were in the foods consumed by Native Americans? How did the food they ate affect them physically?

PHYSICAL EDUCATION

A favorite game of Native American men was the hoop and pole game. In this game of skill and chance, two men had to roll a hoop covered by a net along the ground. They threw darts at the moving hoop and scored points depending where they hit the hoop or net. Research other games and try playing them in class.

MATH

Many tribes had members who were designated timekeepers and historians. The way time was recorded was with bundles of sticks. Weather and significant astrological events were also recorded. Devise a way to keep time during the school year using only bundles of sticks. How could you also record other data using the same bundles?

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