

Art in Daily Life

Native American Collections
at the State Historical Society of Iowa



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The native peoples of North America lived in a world that did not recognize art as something separate from everyday garments and utensils. A new exhibit at the State Historical Society of Iowa illustrates how items of daily use can be elevated from mere utility to examples of artistic skill and vision.

The exhibit features Native American objects of great beauty and craftsmanship and examines them as both works of art and as cultural artifacts. It includes items from early Prairie, Plains, Southwest, Northwest, and Arctic peoples. Many of these artifacts have never been on exhibit before. These pages comprise only a small sample of what you'll see in the exhibit.

The museum collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa have been assembled over time by collectors with interests ranging from mere curiosity to anthropological interest. Much of the early research on native objects was related to identification and classification, with little attention paid to artistic or cultural expression. The museum collections reflect this anthropological interest in identification.

In other words, we know what the items are. What we are beginning to appreciate is the artifact as art object.

CLUB OR DANCE STICK
Lakota Sioux
Ft. Pierre, South Dakota
c. 1875

This club or dance stick might represent an elongated or highly stylized bear, possibly the Plains grizzly. Eastern Plains clubs with relatively straight and forward-facing effigies come from a tradition of ball-headed clubs throughout much of the central and north-eastern woodlands.

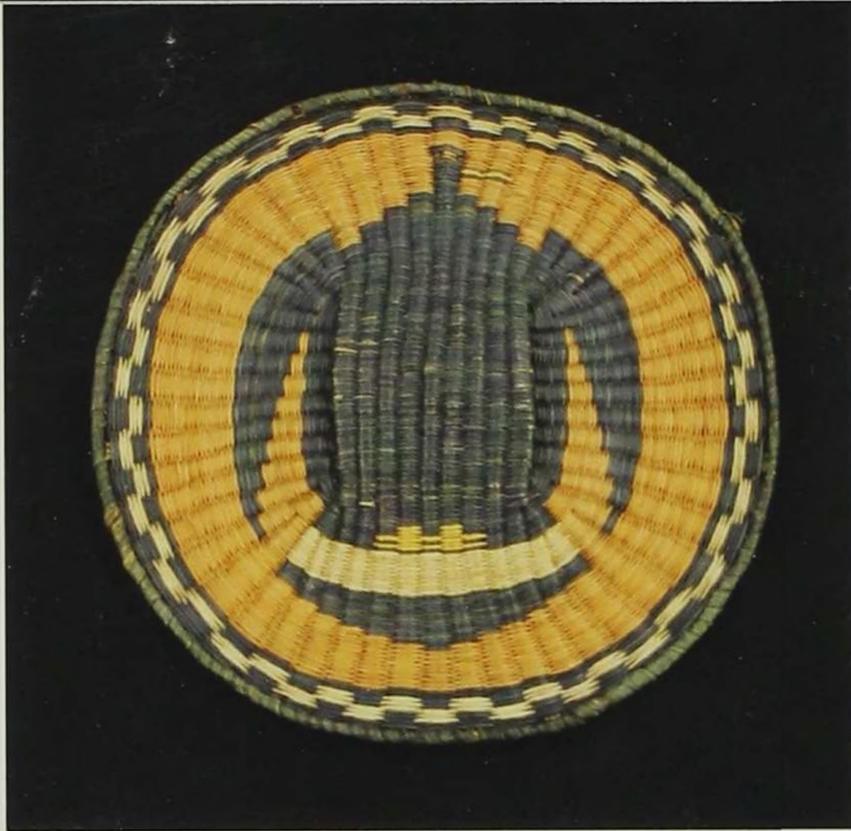


POSSIBLE BAG

Lakota Sioux

c. 1880

Storage and traveling bags of hide like this one are often called "possible bags" because they were used to store every possible thing, from clothing to foodstuffs. Women often made possible bags in pairs to be carried on either side of a saddle or for storage in tipis. This one is decorated with beads, tufts of horsehair, dyed porcupine quills, and tiny tin cones.



PLAITED WICKER PLAQUE

Hopi, Third Mesa
c. 1900

This plaque features the thunderbird design. Such objects were used for decorative or ceremonial purposes.



LIDDED BASKET

Tlingit, Yakutat
Northwest Coast
c. 1900

The ancient design of the swastika was used by many Native American tribes. The tight weave of this basket is typical of basketry from the northwest coastal tribes. A pocket in the lid holds seeds that rattle when shaken.



COILED TRAY

Hopi, Second Mesa
c. 1900

Coiled trays and baskets were associated with wedding ceremonies. Made by the bride's women friends and family, they were presented to the groom's family. The coil was left unfinished to protect the groom from an untimely death.



MEDICINE BAG
Western Great Lakes
c. 1770–1820

Deerskin bags dyed black and embroidered with porcupine quills were created and used by many Great Lakes tribes. Bags like this one held objects and materials associated with sacred power and ritual societies, including charms related to healing, hunting, and warfare. The imagery shown here of lightning emanating from a central figure may relate to the owner's vision and guardian spirits.

Early examples, like this one, were worn on the chest, held in place by a short neck strap of hide or woven cotton. They later evolved into bags with shoulder straps.



SHIELD WITH TRAILER
Cheyenne
c. 1875

Carried by a man on horseback, perhaps in a procession, a shield and trailer like this one served as a symbol of rank, abilities, and status of the individual.

The impressive trailer—here with feathers attached to red wool—would be seen from the back. (On the photograph of the trailer, the shield is visible at the top edge.) The circular shield (see box) is a hardened rawhide disk covered by muslin, and often decorated by the owner with symbols of protection and special powers.





WINTER COUNT, 1812-1879

Lakota Sioux

c. early 20th century

The Plains peoples pictorially recorded their histories through winter counts—calendars of memorable events chronicled by drawings on buffalo or deer hide or on muslin. As with Native Americans' oral traditions, winter counts helped the generations remember and preserve the past.

The first snowfall marked the beginning of a year. Each year was represented by one particular event on the winter count—not necessarily the most significant event but the most memorable. This winter count begins in the center and reads in a spiral. Chronicling the years 1812 to 1879, it depicts many skirmishes. In the lower center the Leonid meteor shower of 1833 is described as "Stars flying in All directions."

Moses Old Bull (1851-1935), the author of this winter count, was Sitting Bull's friend, aide, and fellow warrior. He accompanied him in exile to Canada several months after the Battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876.



LAKOTA SIOUX PURSE
c. 1885



IROQUOIS PINCUSHION
c. 1900

By combining traditional decorative techniques and contemporary forms, Native American artisans created objects of both beauty and utility in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Producing souvenir items was one way Native Americans used traditional ways to produce a cash income.



STANDING FIGURE

Cochiti
1875

In the second half of the 19th century, a genre of Pueblo figurines emerged based on the human form and the socioeconomic changes taking place in Pueblo culture. This figure was probably inspired by one of the traveling musical shows that moved throughout the West in the last half of the century.



SNOW GOGGLES

Top: Inuit
Point Hope, Alaska
c. 1910

Bottom: Inuit
Seward Peninsula, Alaska
before 1932

Native peoples in the far north wore goggles as protection from snow blindness. In these examples, each pair is carved from a single piece of wood.



CHILD'S PARKA,
MITTENS, AND BOOTS
Athapaskan
Nulato, Alaska
before 1932

Absolutely essential for frigid temperatures, this fur clothing also bears artful decoration—twisted yarn cord, beadwork on the cuffs, and a wedge pattern on the bottom of the pullover parka.