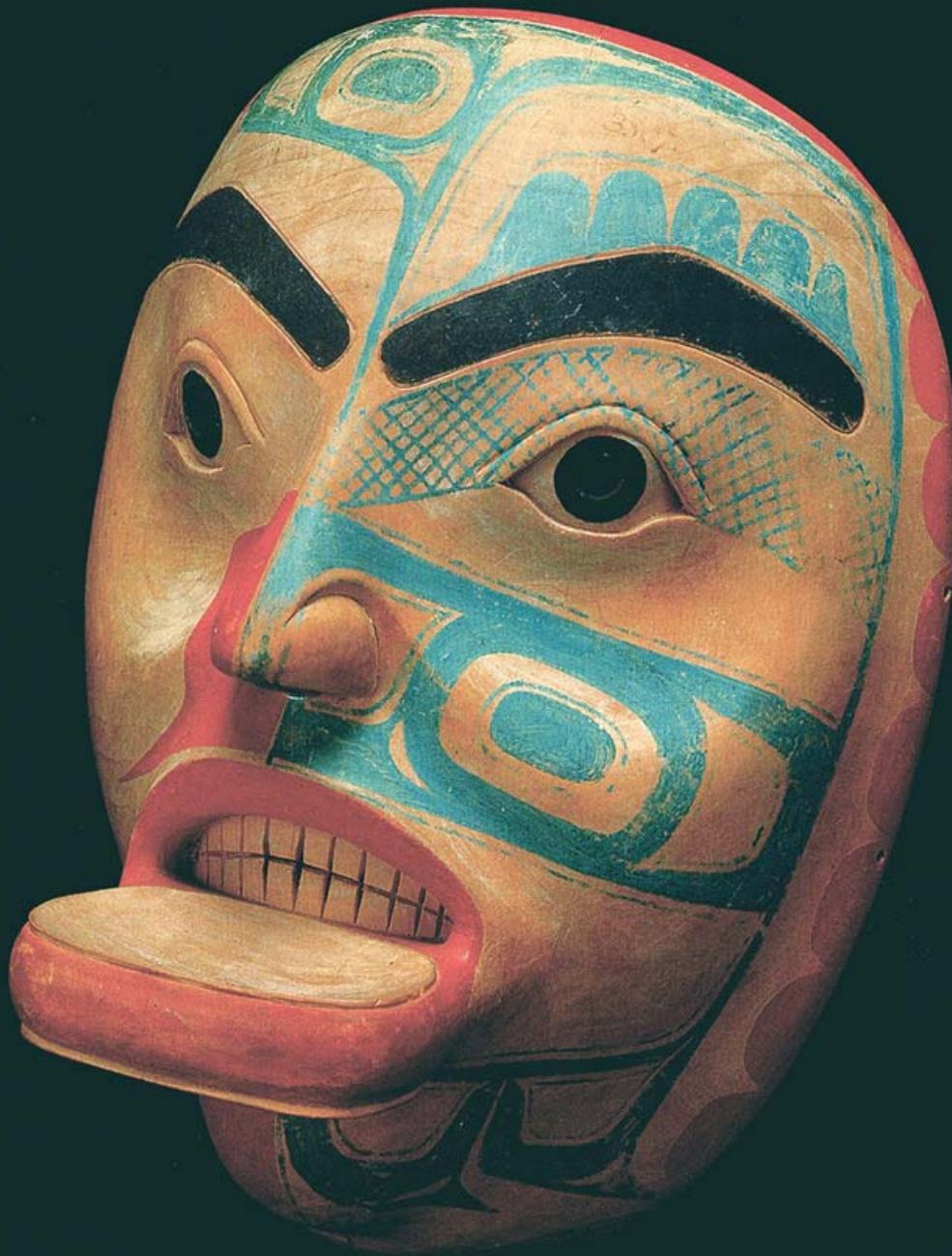


Uncommon Legacies:  
Native American Art from the Peabody Essex Museum

A Resource for Educators



American Federation of Arts

**Uncommon Legacies:  
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The exhibition is organized by the American Federation of Arts and the Peabody Essex Museum.

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American Federation of Arts  
41 East 65<sup>th</sup> Street  
New York, NY 10021

# Uncommon Legacies: Native American Art from the Peabody Essex Museum

## A Resource for Educators

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If you have any questions about this Educator Resource contact:

Suzanne Elder Burke  
Director of Education  
American Federation of Arts  
41 East 65<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY 10021.  
Telephone: 212 988 7700 x26  
Fax: 212 861 2487  
Email: [sburke@afaweb.org](mailto:sburke@afaweb.org)

## Introduction

Native American art represents hundreds of distinct local and artistic traditions, cultures, and languages. Artists use the images, symbols, patterns, materials, and skills of their cultures to communicate in different ways. Even for the uninitiated viewer, much can be gleaned by looking closely at individual works of art. An image's design—its shapes, patterns, and colors— as well as the materials from which the work is made, can draw the viewer in visually. Information about the work of art's cultural context, as well as how it was used and what the symbols signify, can then supplement this close looking and allow for a deeper understanding of a particular object.

This exhibition provides an opportunity to see selections from the rich Native American art collection of the Peabody Essex Museum. Founded in 1799 in Salem, Massachusetts, and originally named the East India Marine Society, the Peabody Essex Museum is one of the oldest museums in America. Created as a trade association for sea captains, the Society was one of a number of similar early American maritime societies that existed in most of the larger towns of the Eastern seaboard. The Society provided a means of sharing information about business contacts, trade routes, and changing international market conditions; and its members—America's first global entrepreneurs—were indefatigable in their simultaneous efforts to engage lucrative new markets around the world and obtain knowledge about the various and complex cultures they encountered. The acquisition of rare and valuable objects was a priority for these captains and also fulfilled the Society's chartered purpose: "to form a museum of natural and artificial curiosities, particularly as are to be found beyond the Cape of Good Hope and Cape Horn." In addition to collecting, each member of the Society was required to keep a journal with entries on where and how each object was acquired. Such documentation is rare for early Native American works of art and constitutes a precious archive.

Viewed as artifacts or curiosities by early non-Native collectors, Native American objects were not thought of as works of art until well into the twentieth century. Now we not only appreciate their cultural significance and the nuances of their designs but see them as works of art rich with layers of meaning and complex visual imagery.

This resource includes information about individual works of art in the exhibition, as well as excerpts from essays by Native Americans published in the exhibition catalogue. Discussion questions may be adapted for the age level of your students. "Points to Consider" are ideas that should be kept in mind when studying Native American art.

## Points to Consider

- Native American works of art are embedded in the culture, customs, and beliefs of the Native American people. A full appreciation of the aesthetic and intellectual value of a Native American work of art therefore involves understanding its cultural context. Seeing cannot be separated from ideas, knowledge, and values: What you observe from looking at a work of art is inextricably linked to the beliefs and customs of the Native American who created it.
- Native American stereotypes were created and perpetuated early on by Europeans, and some of these prevail today. Early stereotypes included believing Native Americans to be wild or savage. Modern stereotypes portray Native Americans as uniformly spiritual and in touch with the land. Many children still picture Native Americans as people who dress in traditional clothing rather than as individuals living in modern society who, like themselves, are as different from one another and as diverse as any other group of people.
- Native Americans adopted new forms of expression and materials in response to their changing environment. The body of Native American art in this exhibition presents a picture of ongoing, fluid change, with rapid diffusion of new styles and frequent experimentation. Native American artists continue to create new forms of expression today.
- Native American works of art vary in their importance and cultural significance; some are religious objects and are considered sacred while others are primarily decorative and/or utilitarian.

## General Activities for Elementary, Middle School, and High School Students

### Preconceived Ideas

- Ask students what words come to mind when they hear the words Native American or Indian.
- Discuss their responses, paying close attention to any stereotypes and examining where students have obtained their information or assumptions.
- Focus discussion on Native American people as individuals who are part of a living, contemporary culture.

### Initial Responses

- Have your students choose one work in the exhibition— either from the exhibition itself or from the slides in this resource—that they feel is powerful.
- Ask each student to write down why they find the work powerful.
- Use students' responses as the basis for a discussion about the works of art.

### Drawing from Descriptions

- This exercise involves learning to articulate one's visual responses to a work of art verbally and through drawing.
- Pair up your students.
- In each pair, have one student be A and the other B.
- Have the B students face away from the screen on which you will be projecting the slide.
- Project a slide from this resource on the screen and have the students in group A describe the object in the slide to their partners without saying what the object is. For example, ask them not to identify a belt or moccasin but, rather, describe the overall shape of the image and its design elements. Have the B students make a drawing of the image based on their partners' descriptions.
- Project a slide of another work of art.
- Repeat this activity, with group A facing away from the screen and group B describing the work of art.
- After the activity, discuss the challenges of describing the forms in a work of art.

### Further Research

- Have students choose a work of art in the exhibition that they find compelling and ask them to conduct research on the people who created the work of art.
- Provide guidelines for students on reliable sources of information. (Use the bibliography and list of websites in this resource as a starting point.)

## Art: Defining the Term

The following excerpt is from Richard W. Hill, Sr., “Art of the Northeast Woodlands.” In *Uncommon Legacies: Native American Art from the Peabody Essex Museum*, p. 191.

...The words of Mary Lou Fox Radulovich, director of the Ojibwa Cultural Foundation, help us understand the meaning in [Native American] works of art: “Indian people have no word for art. Art is a part of life, like hunting, fishing, growing food, marrying and having children. This is an art in the broadest sense . . . an object of daily usefulness, to be admired, respected, appreciated and used, the expression thereby nurturing the needs of body and soul, thereby giving meaning to everything.”

The lack of the word art in a Native language does not mean that art did not exist on its own terms in that society. Most tribes do not have a word for religion and prefer to refer to it as their “way of life.” There is no word for culture, because you cannot isolate culture from the rest of life. The objects created by Native artists pull us toward them because we share a common identity with their creators. Across tribal boundaries, we can feel the emotional and spiritual intent of the artists without knowing the specifics of those feelings. There is a belief in many Native communities that objects such as these need to be a part of people’s lives in order to be useful. They were meant for use, not necessarily to last forever.

Viviane Gray, Mi’kmaq artist and curator wrote, “Art is a way of life—a holistic experience that incorporates not only the visual aesthetics of their cultural experiences (Indian and non-Indian), but also their personal and tribal spiritual beliefs, historical events, stories, dreams, and personal visions.”

The artistic process can therefore be a creative ritual whereby the artist transforms the metaphysical world into physical reality. The ability to translate such things is an honored gift. Appreciation for that gift is then expressed by maintaining a high level of craftsmanship, composing emotionally moving images, and achieving an effect of originality in the conceptualization of each piece. Consequently, two pieces are seldom exactly the same. The individuality of the artist is respected and honored. The act of making a worldview real often transcends the value of the objects themselves, leaving us an opportunity to enjoy their beauty, and even more important, to contemplate their deeper meaning.

### Discussion Questions for Middle School and High School Students

- Discuss the term “art.” What do we mean by the term in our own culture? What are some examples of works of art? How does the term apply to Native American works?
- Read the excerpt by Richard Hill to your class or summarize its main points:
  - Native Americans have no term for art, creating art is part of their way of life.
  - Most Native American tribes do not have a word for religion.
  - The viewer of a Native American work of art can sense the presence of the artist by looking closely at the piece.
  - The Native American artist’s artistic process may be viewed as a creative ritual that transforms something spiritual or conceptual into something concrete.
  - Two Native American works of art are rarely identical.
- Ask students to discuss Viviane Gray’s comment about “art as a way of life.”
- Ask students to discuss how a utilitarian object may be considered a work of art.

## Native American Art and the Role of Museums

The following excerpt is from Thomas “Red Owl” Haukaas, Sicangu Lakota artist, physician and former board member of the Native American Art Studies Association, “Museums, Dialogue, and Contemporary Indian Artists.” In *Uncommon Legacies: Native American Art from the Peabody Essex Museum*, p. 63.

As we move into the new millennium, museums have the potential to be places of genuine cultural meeting. Today, museums are no longer places where visitors are told what to think. The grand narrative is being stripped away, while museums reformulate their functions and the ways in which they and their visitors relate to objects. At the same time, NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, 1990) has opened new lines of communication between Native American communities and museums. Many curators have learned that there is much to be gained through this dialogue. Likewise, many tribes have an unprecedented new window on their creative heritage, through collection inventories that were required by NAGPRA. The opportunity to engage in real dialogue is greater than ever before, and it is incumbent upon museums to facilitate the exchange.

In new settings of respect, cleansed of the trappings of colonialism, museums can give visitors new insights into the humanity of the artists of the past. Each artwork can become a “meeting place.” Visitors can be encouraged to engage with the objects’ makers, even those distant in time. Modern-day viewers can also meet “within” the object, drawn together to share impressions, insights, and knowledge.

Understanding leads to tolerance, then appreciation, and then equality. Real equality means that cultures are allowed to change and adapt to present circumstances, and that they are allowed to reflect these changes in their art. This kind of equality, often denied to American Indians, is needed for them to be truly integrated into our multicultural nation. I have hope that museums will move the public toward ever greater appreciation of Indian art objects as representing true art, not simply anthropological specimens. I, for one, would much rather see a stunningly beautiful pipe bag, woven blanket, or contemporary work than ten arrowheads. I also do not want to see medicine bundles opened to the world, in total disarray. What I ultimately want is a proper appreciation of our art forms, just as Euroamericans appreciate their own early paintings and sculptures and contemporary arts.

### Discussion Questions for Middle School and High School Students

- Discuss the idea of a “meeting place” with your class, specifically, how a Native American exhibition can contribute to the dialogue between Native and non-Native Americans.
- Discuss the author’s comment regarding the kind of objects he would like to see in museum exhibitions. Ask students why they think he would rather see a woven blanket or contemporary work of art than ancient arrowheads. Discuss how a contemporary work of art can be meaningful because the quality of the craftsmanship and originality of the design reflect a living tradition. Discuss the value of exhibiting ancient objects such as arrowheads versus more modern works of art such as a woven blanket or a decorated cradleboard.
- Ask students what they think the author means by saying that “real equality means that cultures are allowed to change and adapt to present circumstances?” Discuss how Native American works of art have changed over the centuries in terms of the incorporation of new materials, patterns, and motifs.
- Ask students why the author objects to displaying the contents of medicine bundles. Discuss the treatment and display of sacred objects. Explain how this issue of the display of sacred objects is debated today.

## Art for Sale

The following excerpt is from Doreen Jensen, Gitksan artist and cultural consultant, Surrey, British Columbia, “The Northwest Coast.” In *Uncommon Legacies: Native American Art from the Peabody Essex Museum*, pp. 144–45.

With the trade came [the growth of tourism and later the] creation of what would become known as “tourist art,” although in those early days the tourist trade was not as we imagine it to have been in the late 1800s, or even as it is today. The fact that work was produced for new purposes rather than the traditional ceremonial or social uses is often read as a sign of the degradation of the art. Although that may have occurred in some cases, I have a slightly different view. For Northwest Coast First Nations artists (a term for the Native nations of Canada), the act of creativity comes from the cosmos. That is what I have been told by the old people. They say the language of the cosmos has been around for thousands of years, and each generation passes it on to the next. Indeed, one has a responsibility to pass on the language of the cosmos. When one looks at the objects carved in argillite, for example, the beings depicted most likely meant as much to the carver as they did to his grandfather and his grandfather. The information contained was a meaningful and coded means of expression.

The making of “tourist art” became even more intense and necessary with the banning of the potlatch, since some artists went to jail for practicing their art. Instead they would masquerade their beliefs and art as tourist art. Even though the mediums and audience had changed, the encoded histories continued to inform us and allow us to pass on the knowledge.

On another note, a European ship carved in argillite was as much a comment on the newcomers as it was a formal examination of the shape and design of the ship. Artists the world over will often take an unfamiliar shape and try to understand it in terms of their own formal means of expression. And since trade had always been part of the economies of the Pacific Northwest even before contact with Europeans or Russians, what was wrong with making something for trade with the newcomers who might like to see some of themselves in our art forms?

## Definitions:

***Potlatch*** Among many Northwest Coast peoples a family’s status was reinforced by the hosting of a large gathering or potlatch, which included feasting, the creation and display of works of art, and the distribution of gifts to the guests on the part of the host.

***Argillite*** A stone used for carving. As the fur trade waned in the 1820s and 1830s Native artists sought to supplement their livelihood by carving novelty items for captains and sailors desiring keepsakes for their families. Argillite pipes, which were ornamental and not intended for smoking, were among the earliest souvenir types with other forms added over time. These carvings would often incorporate figures of animals.

### Discussion Questions for Middle School and High School Students

- Ask students what they think of art that is made for sale to tourists. Ask if they have ever collected or bought souvenirs.
- Ask students to consider why one might think tourist art has negative connotations. Consider assumptions such as:
  - Tourist art is not original.
  - Tourist art objects are created solely for profit.
  - Tourist art dilutes traditional styles and motifs.
- Discuss how:
  1. Works of art created for sale by Native Americans incorporate original motifs.
  2. The art created for sale perpetuates traditional techniques and the production of tourist objects and still is a way for Native Americans to continue their traditional way of life.
  3. Works of art created for tourists incorporate new materials, techniques, and imagery.
  4. The incorporation of these new techniques and images allows Native Americans to create new forms.

## Historical Overview

## Nations Within

When the East India Marine Society and its museum were founded in 1799, America had been independent for sixteen years. The eastern seaboard had been transformed into a landscape of bustling towns, rolling farms, and plantations. Its growing port towns were centers of burgeoning global commerce and incubators of a new sense of identity, national culture, and international standing.

As this new American identity came into focus, the popular consciousness of North American Native people was simultaneously fading. For generations, during the frontier contests of the French and British, and then during the American Revolution, the Native presence had been steadily receding, both physically and politically. The Battle of Fallen Timbers, fought on the distant Ohio frontier in 1795, seemed to symbolize the solidity of the Euroamerican presence and the removal of any serious impediment to its inevitable westward expansion.

By then, for most citizens of the new republic, Native people had become little more than allegorical figures, abstract symbols of a wilderness to be tamed. In the new population centers, the occasional Native visitors were objects of curiosity, representatives of a race unsuited to civilization and destined to extinction, but the “Vanishing Indian” was a national self-deception, a rationalization that had early taken hold in the minds of America’s intellectuals. If, as they believed, the disappearance of the Native nations was a matter of predestination, of an unfolding natural order, then the advancing Euroamerican society was absolved of moral culpability.

Indeed, Native communities had been severely disrupted by the arrival of Europeans in the Americas, spreading disease and conflict and thereby eradicating many thousands of people, villages, and entire cultures. But the survivors regrouped, adopting a wide range of strategies for maintaining their cultural identity and viability.

Some communities found refuge away from Euroamerican population centers, within unpopulated forests and uplands, in order to maintain some of their earlier ways of life. In New England, Abanaki communities lived in the forested north, where they maintained connections with other Native communities in Quebec, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick. In western New York, the powerful Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) maintained sufficient ancestral lands to carry on traditional agriculture, despite being surrounded by farms of new immigrants. In the south, Creek (Muskogee) communities had found refuge from the early Spanish and English colonies in the swamplands of Florida and the Gulf Coast.

Some Native communities had little choice but to try and establish niches in the new Euroamerican landscape. In southern New England, some lived invisibly, in pocket communities located on the outskirts of towns, alongside African-American and other ethnic underclasses. There, they found employment as domestics or laborers in Euroamerican homes and farms, or peddled homemade baskets, sundries, and souvenirs. Meanwhile, the Cherokee (Tsalagi) and other Southern cultures made a determined effort to adapt to the new economy by creating Native farming communities with fences, orchards, livestock, and fields of corn and potatoes.

The challenges to Native identity never disappeared, and communities were subjected to endless trials and tribulations in response to shifting state and Federal policy, land pressures, swindlers, and prejudice. Among the most severe tests of survival were the enforced removals of the Native nations from their ancestral lands in the Southeast during

the 1830s and 1840s. Set in motion by the Jackson administration in flagrant violation of law and morality, these tragic moves—known as the Trail of Tears—effectively exiled thousands of Native people to reservations in the Indian Territory west of the Mississippi River.

In all these cases, Native identity was kept alive by art, language, oral history, family traditions, and social institutions. Native women played a key role in the preservation of community identity, maintaining and adapting clothing and other handiwork that spoke silently yet powerfully of Native heritage and cohesiveness.

Reprinted from text written by John R. Grimes and Mary Lou Curran. In *Uncommon Legacies: Native American Art from the Peabody Essex Museum*, pp. 88, 89.

## Pacific Coast Traders

The New England captains who arrived on the Northwest Coast in the late 1700s encountered well-seasoned Native traders, whose negotiating skills had been honed by their own trade networks and long-standing familiarity with European mariners. For decades, Russia and Spain had laid claim to portions of the Pacific Coast. The Russians had built an outpost on Kodiak Island in 1784, while the Spanish had earlier established a series of missions along the southern coast of California, followed by a fort and trading post at Nootka Sound in 1789.

Disease was an early scourge on the Pacific Coast as it had been elsewhere in the Americas. It was particularly devastating to the Unangan and Alutiiq peoples (formerly called Aleut), and others who lived in the harsh subarctic environment in the north, and was just as fatal among the people to the south, living in the arid lands of California. For the populations in between, such as the Haida and Tlingit, disease had also taken a severe toll, but people in the rich coastal environment rebounded more quickly than in many other areas. For them, the early fur trade provided an attractive source of wealth in an already rich land.

The New Englanders, finding that the Natives were powerful and therefore potentially dangerous, viewed them with apprehension; mariners had been killed and enslaved, and cheating or insulting a chief was done at one's peril. During the early years of the fur trade, the Americans learned the complexities of the Native marketplace; for example, one village might desire elk skins, which could be obtained from another village that wanted copper. They also discovered that in this fragile and highly intertwined commercial environment, a single ship's cargo could glut the market for a particular item and thus ruin a commercial venture. As a hedge, some ships began carrying raw materials, such as iron bars, in order to fabricate desirable trade goods on the spot.

While they traded on the coast, the New Englanders routinely learned the names of chiefs and villages, but more to facilitate trade than out of interest in local culture. They perceived northwestern Natives as strange and exotic, and they frequently expressed abhorrence of some of the local customs.

For Native communities, the fur trade had both social and political importance. It elevated the standing of Native leaders and traders, especially those positioned between the maritime traders and other Native groups. Access to guns tipped the scales of intertribal power and provided leverage in negotiations with Euroamericans.

As sea-otter pelts became scarce in the 1820s, the Natives were in a "seller's" market, and the cost of prime pelts escalated dramatically. Before long, however, the sea otters had been hunted to near extinction, and the fur trade shifted to the interior, out of the control of coastal Native middlemen. By the 1820s, the Haida and Nootka (Nuu-chah-nulth) were forced to trade through the Tsimshian (Gitksan).

The most severe hardships were those imposed on the Natives to the north and south. The Russian American Company brutalized the Aleut (Unangan and Alutiiq) people, forcing their men into service on hunting expeditions as far south as California. In the south, tens of thousands of California Natives were forced to live in semi-slavery on mission compounds. The decline of otter hunting eased conditions somewhat for the Aleut people, but the Russian American Company still required a quota of Native men in each village to spend three years in service to the company. Old men, women, and children were required to produce a specified number of feather parkas every year.

In the south, the Mexican government confiscated church lands and released some thirty thousand Natives from servitude in 1833. However, many Natives were left landless when large

tracts were awarded to Mexican ranchers, who dominated the region until California became an American territory in 1848 and another rush of settlers began to arrive.

Reprinted from text written by John R. Grimes and Mary Lou Curran. In *Uncommon Legacies: Native American Art from the Peabody Essex Museum*, p. 128.

## The Interior Wilderness: Outposts, Explorers, and Sojourners

In 1803 the United States acquired the Louisiana Territory, opening the way for trade and settlement beyond the Mississippi River. President Thomas Jefferson, envisioning a nation that stretched “from sea to shining sea,” organized the Lewis and Clark expedition to investigate the route westward along the Missouri River to the Columbia River and the Pacific Coast. By this time, the Native peoples of the West had already been engaged in centuries of direct and indirect trade with the French. Thus, the American expeditions of Lewis and Clark and others aimed less at discovering new territory than at refining the existing knowledge of the West, its Native peoples, the fur trade, and future locations for fortifications.

The Americans’ victory over the British in the War of 1812 helped ensure the continuation of the United States’ expansion in the Great Lakes region and further west. Within a few years, a series of new American forts were built along the border zone in order to defend American sovereignty and take control of the major fur-trading centers and transportation routes.

Through this period of massive territorial transfers, Native Americans were faced with difficult diplomatic challenges, as they were forced to choose alliances with competing European and American interests. They often chose to align themselves with those who had treated them favorably in trade, and who posed the least threat to their own sovereignty and territorial control. Unfortunately, this strategy placed them on the losing side, first with the French and later with the British.

By the 1820s, American forts were established across the new territories’ northern borders, and the region was opening to travel: steamboat transportation began to extend across the Great Lakes and progressively northward up the Mississippi River. The hunters who supported the fur trade had shifted their attention to the buffalo of the Northern Plains, as beaver had already been depleted in most areas.

The doctrine of Manifest Destiny reached its full expression during this time, and the rich western lands beckoned to settlers and opportunity seekers. One scholar of the period, Henry Adams, went so far as to call the North American continent “an uncovered ore bed.”

At the same time, the notion that Native peoples were destined to extinction shifted from speculation to self-fulfilling prophecy and policy, as the administration of the new territories sought to manage resident Natives. Lewis Cass, the governor of Michigan Territory from 1813 to 1831, aggressively negotiated with Great Lakes Natives to exchange land for annuity payments. In fact, as the eastern woodlands fur trade had collapsed and the region was overrun with Euroamerican settlers, many of these groups had few other options for their livelihood. But annuities proved demoralizing, reducing incentives for self-sufficiency and resulting in widespread alcoholism.

Despite such fundamental problems, Native artists of this period continued to make objects that asserted their peoples’ identity, revitalized older motifs, and made experimental use of such annuity goods as ribbon, cloth, and beads. In addition, from the Great Lakes region to the eastern Plains, the production of souvenir objects became commonplace, providing added opportunities for artistic experiment and expression.

Reprinted from text written by John R. Grimes and Mary Lou Curran. In *Uncommon Legacies: Native American Art from the Peabody Essex Museum*, p. 172.

## The Interior Wilderness: Missionaries

Throughout the Great Lakes and interior regions, the incursion of Europeans and Americans in area after area generally followed a similar progression: the French, frequently accompanied by Catholic missionaries, established trading posts, which were taken over first by the British, then by the Americans, both of whom built forts. Protestant missionaries then arrived, usually working at Native villages within a reasonable radius of the forts. The missionaries thus arrived among Native people who often had a long familiarity with Euroamericans and the Christianity of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Jesuits.

Protestant missionaries differed from the Roman Catholics not only in theology but in social attitudes and style of work. Many of the Protestant missionaries were from New England, where they had been influenced both by regional conservatism and the evangelism of the Second Great Awakening. They arrived with an integrated theological and social agenda, and usually viewed Native lifeways as antithetic to true conversion and civilized living. They were systematic in their acquisition of languages, in order to preach effectively, to publish religious tracts, and to teach the Natives to read.

Protestant missionaries collected objects for their supporters “back East,” who wanted to see the exotic and primitive nature of the people among whom the missionaries lived. In some areas, they encouraged Native women to create craft objects that could be displayed or sold to support mission expenses. In addition to the institutional support of missionary organizations, these missionaries sometimes received donations of clothing and food shipped by individual charity groups.

For a variety of reasons, Protestant missionaries were often less successful in converting Natives than the Jesuits had been. They tended to maintain a discrete social distance from the people they lived among, and were suspicious of the sincerity of Native expressions of faith. In some areas, missionary efforts to teach farming were undermined by annuity systems that diminished the incentives for a new livelihood.

In the end, the Protestant mission effort in this region became overwhelmed by larger political forces, as Native nations continued to be pushed and relocated westward. By 1840, the line of Euroamerican settlement had reached the edge of the Missouri timber country, at the gateway to the Great Plains. By this time, the American nation was well invested in the removal policy advanced by Andrew Jackson, Lewis Cass, and others. This program would continue until the time of the Civil War, when the nation’s massive military mobilization enabled the next phase of America’s Native policy—the twenty-year series of Indian Wars that began in the 1860s.

Reprinted from text written by John R. Grimes and Mary Lou Curran. In *Uncommon Legacies: Native American Art from the Peabody Essex Museum*, p. 210.

## South American Adventurers

As post-Columbian French, British, and Spanish settlers and entrepreneurs competed for territory and furs in North America, a similar set of colonial and Native interactions played out in South America. On the east and north coasts of that continent, Dutch, British, and French plantations were begun by the mid-1600s; in the south, cattle ranches were established. In the northwest, Peruvian mines provided much of the world's silver, extracted from the ground by forced Native labor.

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, New England ships journeyed to the Pacific Coast and China by rounding Cape Horn, taking them past the South American colonies, where they stopped for commerce and provisions. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, New England fur traders harvested large numbers of sealskins at the Falkland Islands, Patagonia, and elsewhere off South America's coasts.

In the 1830s and 1840s, new commercial interests brought American ships to South America, including not only long-standing commodities such as sugar, lumber, and hides, but also other products for the industrial and scientific age, such as rubber and phosphates. Rubber was initially imported for toys and novelty "gum boots," but the process of vulcanization created new uses for the material, including elasticized fabrics and gussets.

The first steamboat ascended the Amazon in 1843, opening the interior to popular travel. Published narratives of exotic jungle adventures, together with rumors of lost treasures, fired the imaginations of Americans, as well as Europeans. Before finally becoming a Mississippi riverboat pilot, Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) dreamed of making his fortune in South America, and George Catlin headed for the Crystal Mountains of Brazil in search of gold. In 1847, Michael W. Shepard, scion of a wealthy merchant family in Salem, journeyed up the Amazon, collecting Native featherwork and other objects.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Salem's deepwater trade had declined, shifting to the larger port cities of Boston and New York. Consequently, collecting slowed at the museum of the East India Marine Society, since fewer captains were returning with "natural and artificial curiosities" for the display shelves. In 1867, the museum became the Peabody Academy of Science, with Salem-born Frederick Ward Putnam serving as superintendent, and then director, until 1875. Putnam went on to become one of the leading figures in nineteenth-century Native American studies, and an organizer of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago that commemorated four centuries of Native and Euroamerican interaction in the Americas.

Reprinted from text written by John R. Grimes. In *Uncommon Legacies: Native American Art from the Peabody Essex Museum*, p. 210.

## Selected Works of Art

## Slide List

1. *Bear Sculpture*  
Pawtucket, 16<sup>th</sup> century  
Basalt  
H 5 ½ in. (14 cm)  
Peabody Essex Museum; Gift of Beara Eaton, 1898 (E50,296)
2. *Moccasins*  
Iroquois (Haudenosaunee), early 19<sup>th</sup> century  
Leather, dyed quills, beads, and silk  
L 10 ¼ in. (26cm)  
Peabody Essex Museum; Ex Essex Institute collection, 1947 (E26,326)
3. *Wampum Belt*  
Possibly Iroquois (Haudenosaunee), 18<sup>th</sup> century  
Shells and leather  
L 43 ¼ in. (110 cm)  
Peabody Essex Museum; Gift of New England Historic Geneological Society, 1963 (E39,383)
4. *Human Face Mask*  
Kaigani Haida, ca. 1820  
Wood and paint  
H 10 ¼ in. (26.2 cm): W 7 ½ in. (19 cm)  
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5. *Chilkat Blanket*  
Tlingit, before 1832  
Mountain-goat wool and yellow cedar bark  
W 63 ¾ in. (162 cm)  
Peabody Essex Museum; Gift of Robert Bennet Forbes, 1832 ( E3648)
6. *Pouch*  
Northeastern Region, mid-19<sup>th</sup> century  
Cloth and beads  
H 7/8 in. (20 cm.)  
Peabody Essex Museum; Purchase, 1953 (E31,337)
7. *Necklace*  
Possible Dakota (Eastern Sioux), eastern Plains region, before 1826  
Leather and bear claws  
L11 in. (28 cm)  
Peabody Essex Museum; Gift of John Marsh, 1826 (E3678)

8. *Baby Carrier*

Chippewa-Ojibwa or Ottawa (Odawa), ca. 1835

Wood, cloth, quills, beads, leather, and shells

H 31 1/8 in. (79 cm)

Peabody Essex Museum; Ex A.B.C.F.M. Collection, 1946 (E25.409)

9. *Headdress*

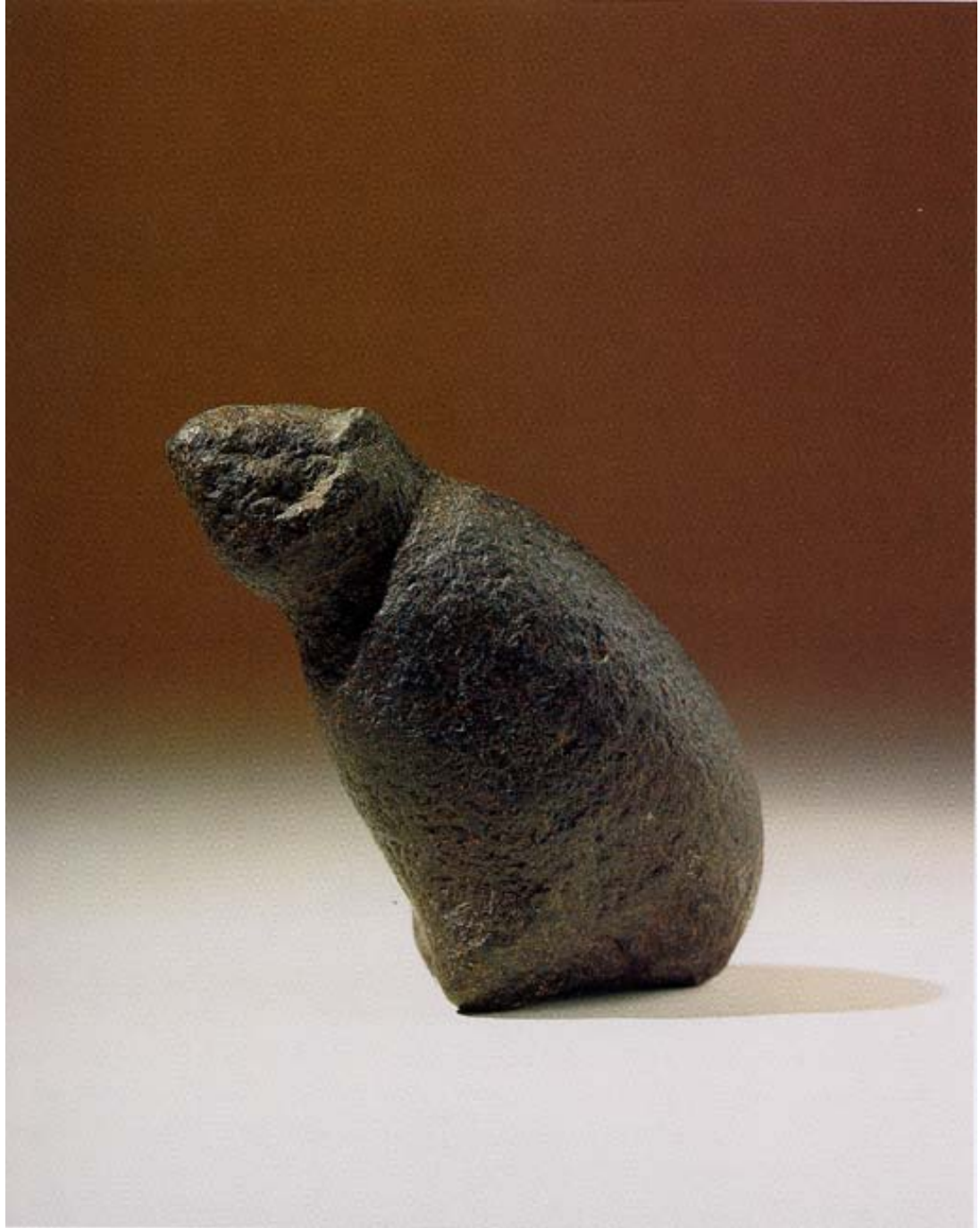
Brazil, before ca. 1853

Fiber and feathers

H 19 1/4 in. (49 cm)

Peabody Essex Museum; Gift of M. W. Shepard, 1853 (E6988)

## **Selected Works of Art with Discussion Questions**



*Bear Sculpture*

Pawtucket, 16<sup>th</sup> century

Basalt

H 5 ½ in. (14 cm)

Peabody Essex Museum; Gift of Beara Eaton, 1898 (E50,296)

### 1. *Bear Sculpture*

Pawtucket, 16<sup>th</sup> century

Basalt

H 5 ½ in. (14 cm)

Peabody Essex Museum; Gift of Beara Eaton, 1898 (E50,296)

By the late sixteenth century, decades before the first successful English settlement in New England, Native communities were engaged in significant interactions with European fishermen. Records by captains who sailed to New England documented a region well populated by native people in 1614. In 1619, after Pawtucket leader Nanepashemet was killed in an intertribal raid, the disease-weakened Pawtucket came under the political influence of Passaconaway, leader of the Pennacook. By 1621, however, the Native population had been decimated owing to the introduction of new diseases. In 1636, Roger Conant and his followers settled at the deserted Pawtucket village of Nahymkeke (later renamed Salem, after the Hebrew word *shalom* meaning peace). In the aftermath of King Philip's war (1675–76), most of the remaining Pawtucket were sold into slavery or imprisoned by colonists. The survivors moved elsewhere or were absorbed into the poor underclass of the non-Native population. By the mid-eighteenth century, no visible Pawtucket community remained in their former homeland.

This basalt sculpture of a bear, one of the earliest pieces in the exhibition, was discovered in Salem in 1830, during excavation for a house foundation. It was most likely created by a Pawtucket artist in the decades shortly before the first pandemics swept the region. Although Native people did eat bear meat, bears were not a staple resource, and in some areas of New England, hunters actually refrained from killing female bears. (A traditional story relates how a she-bear cared for a lost child.) The bear was associated with the Pennacook leader Passaconaway, whose name means “child of the bear,” and this particular image of a bear may represent a clan protector or ancestor. Unusual in terms of its simple shape and minimal detail, this sculpture nonetheless has a powerful presence. The artist conveys a sense of movement through the overall shape of the bear's body by creating a form that leans forward from its base. Articulating the ears and hind legs in the subtlest way, the artist focuses on the animal's pose rather than on the details of its anatomy.

Richard W. Hill, Sr., Tuscarora artist and Director of the Haudenosaunee Resource Center, writes:

It is hard to re-imagine the native frame of reference of these diverse people who did not think about the kinds of things we think about today. Certainly, the original people of the Northeast Woodlands and the Great Lakes region were concerned about family, community, food, shelter, learning, and expressing belief. We still have those same concerns, but our world is very different from theirs, and this has an impact on what we hold to be valuable in our society. Yet, one of the most amazing things about art is that it provides an opportunity to reflect on the possibilities. By concentrating our thoughts on the objects made by unknown artists, we can re-imagine the artistic process, recreate the visualization that the maker perceived, and, perhaps, if we are lucky, re-experience the creativity of placing thought, belief, and movement into the action that produced these works of expression.

For example, the Northeastern bear sculpture carved out of black igneous rock by a Pawtucket artist most likely in the sixteenth century, gives us a chance to re-imagine the magic of the artistic process. This bear could easily fit right into the sculpture collection in a museum of modernist art. The artist's skillful interpretation of the essential spirit of the bear, made by “pecking” two stones against each other to slowly form the contour of the image, is an attractive feature of this small but powerful object. It is the simplicity of the form by which the artist depicts the bear that gives this small carving its artistic power. However, the artist also captures the life of the bear, showing it in an unusual position, perhaps about to move. Both the limited technology of the era and the economy of form make this an unusual work of art from a people who left us few examples of their cultural expression. We do not need to know the cultural frame of reference for their beliefs about the bear; this piece tells us that such beliefs existed and that the artist thought about them.

From *Uncommon Legacies, Native American Art from the Peabody Essex Museum*, p. 188.

## Definitions

**Modernist art** A term that focuses on the formal elements (line, shape, and color) of the work of art and is used to describe much twentieth-century European and American art. Modernist art is usually characterized by abstract forms that are simplified or distorted in some way. Hill's analogy refers to the simplified forms characteristic of European modernist sculpture of the early twentieth century.

## Discussion Questions for Elementary, Middle School, and High School Students

- Ask students to describe this sculpture. Can they guess what it is? How can they tell?
- Ask students which parts of the bear's anatomy the artist has articulated or described. What has the artist decided to omit? Ask students why they think these details were omitted.
- Ask students to note and describe the bear's posture.



*Moccasins*

Iroquois (Haudenosaunee), early 19<sup>th</sup> century

Leather, dyed quills, beads, and silk

L 10 ¼ in. (26 cm)

Peabody Essex Museum; Ex Essex Institute collection, 1947 (E26,326)

## 2. *Moccasins*

Iroquois (Haudenosaunee), early 19<sup>th</sup> century

Leather, dyed quills, beads, and silk

L 10 ¼ in. (26 cm)

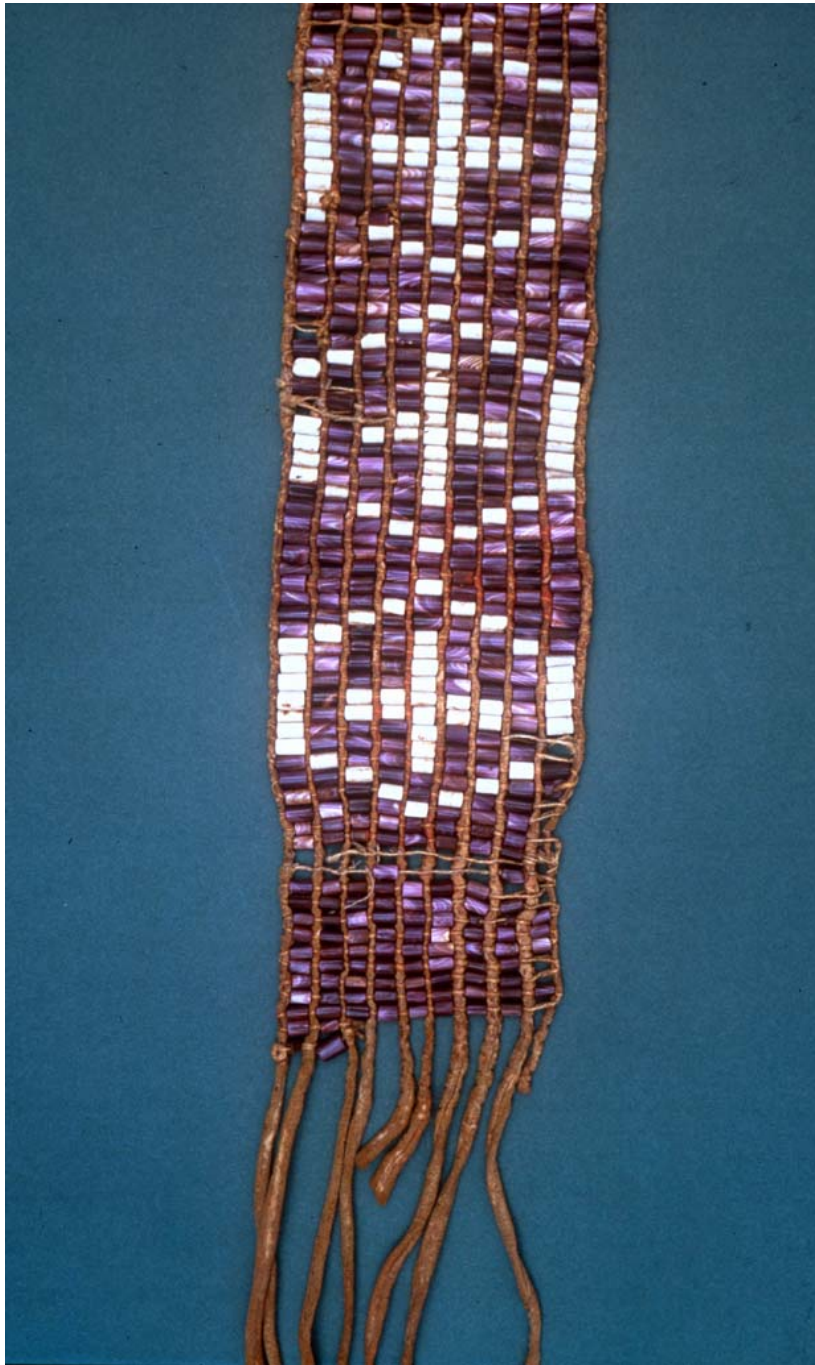
Peabody Essex Museum; Ex Essex Institute collection, 1947 (E26,326)

This pair of quilled and beaded moccasins has been decorated predominantly with dyed quill embroidery. Each porcupine supplied hundreds of quills ranging up to five inches in length. Native American artists frequently used porcupine quills for embroidered decorations on birchwood boxes and clothing. When heated in water and combined with dyes, the exterior tissue of the quill easily absorbs the dye and produces intense and durable colors. Dyes for quills range from barks, roots, mosses, and minerals, to berries, nuts, and flower petals. White, red, and black were the colors most commonly used in quillwork prior to the introduction of new pigments by the Europeans. By the mid-nineteenth century natural dyes were supplanted by commercial colors that were brighter and gave artists additional creative options.

Moccasins are utilitarian objects, yet their design and decoration reflect a rich artistic tradition. In this pair, straight and wavy lines have been combined with several repeating curvilinear motifs to create a dynamic and integrated design. Moccasins of buckskin are comparatively delicate and even with proper care would not have lasted for more than a few weeks of regular use outdoors. An adult would have required at least a dozen pairs a year. Northeastern moccasins were a popular and widely exported souvenir item during the nineteenth century.

### Discussion Questions for Elementary, Middle School, and High School Students

- Discuss the idea of a utilitarian object as art.
- Discuss how clothing may be considered an art form.
- Have students describe the design on the moccasins and sketch a detail of the pattern.



*Wampum Belt*

Possibly Iroquois (Haudenosaunee), 18<sup>th</sup> century

Shells and leather

L 43 ¼ in. (110 cm)

Peabody Essex Museum; Gift of New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1963 (E39,383)

### 3. *Wampum Belt*

Possibly Iroquois (Haudenosaunee), 18<sup>th</sup> century

Shells and leather

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Peabody Essex Museum; Gift of New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1963 (E39,383)

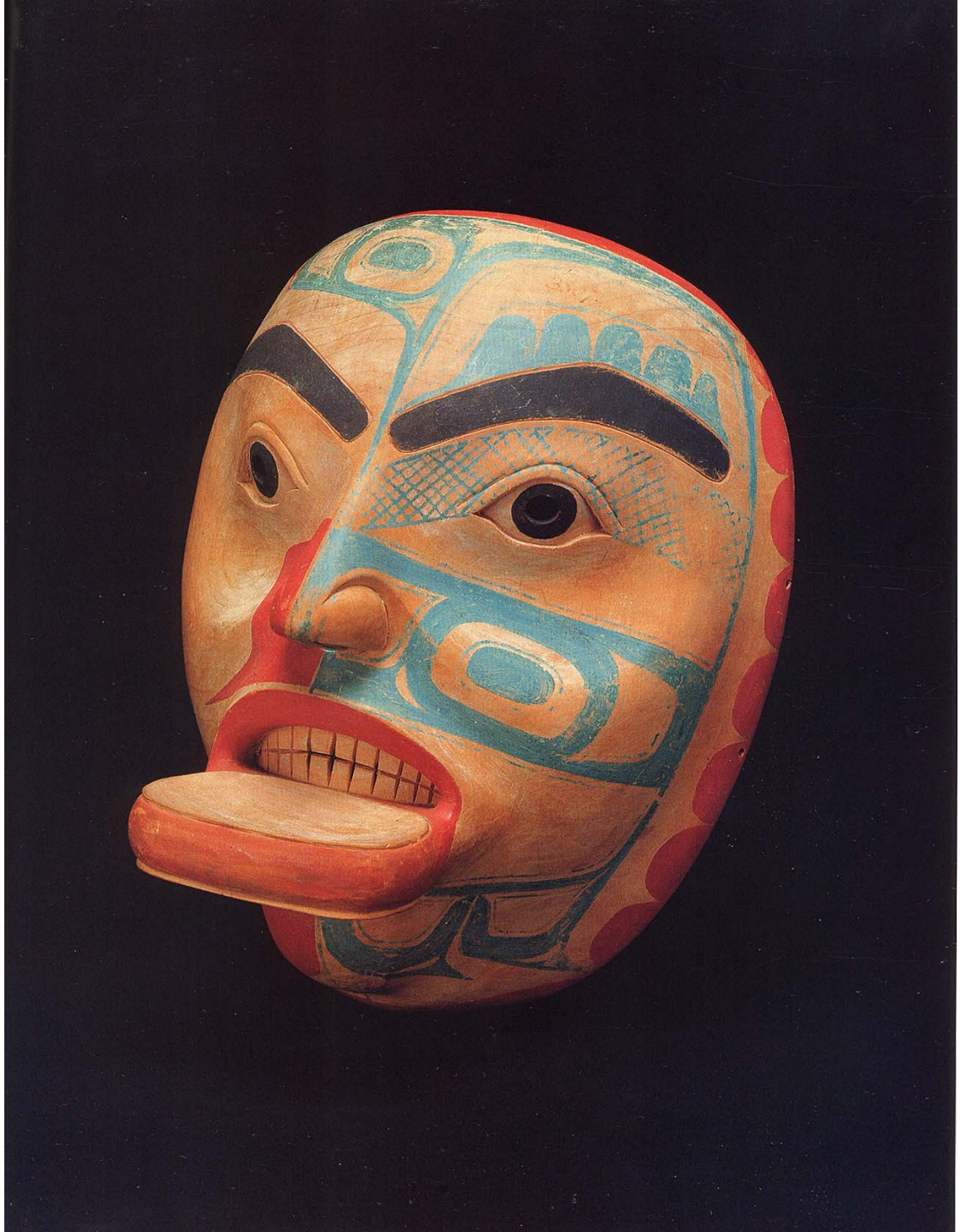
Wampum served both as a documentary record and as a means of exchange in Native American life. Among the Iroquois wampum strings functioned as memory aids for reciting ritual speeches, while wampum belts recorded intertribal communiqués and commemorated councils and treaties. Colonial and subsequent American authorities adapted the ritual uses of wampum to Federal purposes by making and presenting belts to Native leaders. To meet these needs, non-Native wampum factories were established, notably by John Campbell in New Jersey during the early 1780s.

No treaty was considered valid among the Iroquois until a wampum belt was made and accepted by the Grand Council of Chiefs. Thus ratified, a treaty belt became part of the sacred archive, placed together with others commemorating previous treaties and councils. By tradition, the Onondaga are the Keepers of the Wampum for the Iroquois, and as such are charged with the responsibility for preserving this vital heritage. Over time, honorific names have been bestowed on many belts, such as the *Five Nations Territorial Belt*, symbolizing the bonds among the five original nations of the Iroquois alliance; the *Six Nations and George Washington Belt*, representing the friendship between the Iroquois and the Thirteen Colonies; the *Two Row Belt*, symbolizing the harmonious relationship desired between the Native Nations and the Euroamericans; and the *Evergrowing Tree Belt*, representing the protective shelter of the Iroquois alliance.

In the composition of a wampum belt, the relative predominance of purple or white beads is related to its symbolic intent. Belts made mainly from white beads suggest cordial diplomacy, while those that make extensive use of purple (sometimes referred to as “black”) beads have more sober connotations. The meaning of this belt, which is predominantly purple with ten white cross-filled hexagons, is now lost but does, however, bear faint traces of red paint on some of the beads and fringe. Belts marked with red were understood as a call to war. In 1763, the Ottawa (Odawa) leader Pontiac is said to have sent messengers bearing red-painted belts to the eastern Native nations in order to enlist their support in an offensive against the British.

#### Discussion Questions for Elementary and Middle School Students

- Have students look closely at the pattern on this wampum belt and describe what they see. See if they can identify the hexagons filled with a cross. You may want to have them try drawing the pattern to facilitate the process of seeing.
- Explain the symbolic importance of the color of the beads.



*Human Face Mask*

Kaigani Haida, ca. 1820

Wood and paint

H 10 ¼ in. (26.2 cm); W 7 ½ in. (19 cm)

Peabody Essex Museum; Gift of Daniel Cross, 1827 (E3483)

#### 4. *Human Face Mask*

Kaigani Haida, ca. 1820

Wood and paint

H 10 ¼ in. (26.2 cm); W 7 ½ in. (19 cm)

Peabody Essex Museum; Gift of Daniel Cross, 1827 (E3483)

Scholars have long puzzled over the lineage of the noblewoman whose face is represented on this mask, wearing a device in her lower lip. The printed East India Marine Society catalogue of 1831 describes the mask as one “once used by a distinguished chieftainess of the Indians at Nootka Sound.” The Nootka Sound provenance occurs in many early-nineteenth-century museum records; some mariners of that time used the term as a generalized reference to the Northwest Coast of North America, and antiquarians, charged with making order of early collection records, later compounded the problem by applying the Nootka Sound provenance even more indiscriminately.

An examination of the earliest accession records and ship logs in the East India Marine Society collection places the source of this mask at the Kaigani Haida village of Kasaan, located in what is now southeastern Alaska. At or before puberty, Haida, Tlingit, and Tsimshian (Gitksan) girls had their lower lip pierced with a bone pin. Once the aperture healed, successively larger wooden plugs called labrets were inserted, in time distending the lower lip.

Masks representing women wearing labrets are well established as ceremonial pieces in the ethnographic record. However, this work of art and others from the hand of the same artist were made as gifts or trade items for early seafarers. (The non-Native fascination with labret use probably explains the early frequency of this mask form as a souvenir.) Several distinctive labret women masks and at least four doll-like figures are known to be from the hand of the master who carved this mask. The name Jenna Cass has been associated with these masks, taken from a note written on the inside of one of the masks. Jenna Cass is considered to be the English rendering of Djilakons, the Haida name of an ancestress of the Eagle moiety of the Haida. Ethnologist John Swanton wrote: “Djiláqons is a conspicuous and ever recurring figure in their mythology.... All the Eagles upon this island came in succession out of the womb of Djiláqons. In the process of descent they became differentiated [into various families].”

The expressiveness of the mask’s design—created by the use of bold color and patterns—is striking. Carved features such as the eyelids and eyebrows combine with painted forms that decorate the entire face. The mouth, accentuated by the protruding labret, is the mask’s most prominent feature. Both sides of the face are painted with bright turquoise and red paint, however, the left side of the mask (the right side of the face) is minimally decorated in comparison to the right side. On the left, a small red form covers part of the nose and cheek along with a turquoise pattern high above the eyebrow. On the right, turquoise patterns span from the very top of the forehead to the chin with a red scalloped pattern trimming the edge of the mask. The combination of a stark image on the left, where the wood surface is bare, combined with a more detailed rendering on the right, is a powerful one.

#### Discussion Questions for Elementary, Middle School, and High School Students

- Ask students to look closely at this mask and make a list of words that come to mind. Ask them to tell you some of the words they have written down. Discuss why they think each particular word came to mind. Use these initial reactions as the basis for a more in-depth discussion of the piece.
- Ask students to articulate the differences between the left and right sides of the face.

- Doreen Jenson, Gitksan artist and a cultural consultant from Surrey, British Columbia, writes:

There is a story told to me that illustrates the continuum of our beliefs. Robert Davidson, the great-grandson of the renowned Haida artist Charles Edenshaw (1839–1920), recalls his grandmother, Florence Davidson, telling of how Edenshaw’s son and apprentice would wash his hands under Edenshaw’s hands, letting the water flow over Edenshaw’s hands onto his own. Perhaps Charles Edenshaw washed his hands under the hands of the master he apprenticed under, and that man washed his hands under the hands of his teacher. This act indeed could have been repeated back generations and generations—to the time before time.

From *Uncommon Legacies, Native American Art from the Peabody Essex Museum*, p. 146.

Read Doreen Jensen’s retelling of the Haida story about washing hands and ask students to interpret it.



*Chilkat Blanket*

Tlingit, before 1832

Mountain-goat wool and yellow cedar bark

W 63 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (162 cm)

Peabody Essex Museum; Gift of Robert Bennet Forbes, 1832 ( E3648)

### 5. *Chilkat Blanket*

Tlingit, before 1832

Mountain-goat wool and yellow cedar bark

W 63 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (162 cm)

Peabody Essex Museum; Gift of Robert Bennet Forbes, 1832 ( E3648)

The form of the traditional Chilkat blanket seems to have originated with the Tsimshian. Around the year 1834, when Tsimshian weaving is thought to have ended, the Tlingit began creating the form that was named after a northern Tlingit group which specialized in creating the blankets. Prestige objects among Tlingit chiefs, Chilkat blankets were woven by women who copied designs painted by male artists on special pattern boards.

Chilkat weaving is a complex technical process. Both the designer and weaver of the blanket focus on the formline design, the continuous black lines that define the blanket's visual imagery. Using intricate twining stitches, the weaver implements a detailed design. The patterns may appear purely decorative, but in fact have multiple layers of meaning. Even the most abstract design is often representational. This woven blanket, worn as a cape, is the earliest-known Chilkat-type blanket, and its imagery, like that of most Chilkat blankets, is difficult to decipher.

A diving killer whale is the main figure in this traditional blanket. Typically, the major motif is in the center of the design and is best visible when the cape is worn around the shoulders. In this blanket, the central design field shows the whale's head at the bottom, with body and fluked tail segments rising above it. Placed horizontally at the top of the field are representations of shield-like coppers, the Tlingit's primary medium of exchange at potlatch ceremonies. In addition to the overall image of the whale, the designer has included smaller profile views of the animal at the bottom right and left of the blanket formed by the lateral and dorsal fins.

### Discussion Questions for Elementary, Middle School, and High School Students

- What do you think this work of art is made of?
- How do you think it was used?
- How do you think the way we view the design changes when the cape is worn?
- Ask students to try and decipher the whale imagery on the blanket—the lower central image of a diving whale and the side images of two whales in profile.
- Ask students to choose a detail of the blanket to examine closely. If students are allowed to draw in the exhibition, have them sketch a detail of the design. Afterward, discuss why this is difficult, e.g., because of the complexity of the design, the students' unfamiliarity with the forms.



*Pouch*

Northeastern Region, mid-19<sup>th</sup> century

Cloth and beads

H 7/8 in. (20 cm.)

Peabody Essex Museum; Purchase, 1953 (E31,337)

## 6. *Pouch*

Northeastern Region, mid-19<sup>th</sup> century

Cloth and beads

H 7/8 in. (20 cm.)

Peabody Essex Museum; Purchase, 1953 (E31,337)

Among the most popular Native items produced in the Northeast during the mid-to-late nineteenth century were fancy beaded purses and pouches. Usually made by Micmac (Mi'kmaq) and Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) women and sold at tourist attractions such as Niagara Falls.

The design of the beadwork in this and similar examples (some of it made by non-Natives) was highly influenced by Victorian fashion.

For Euroamericans in cities in the Eastern United States and in Europe, beaded accessories seem to have evoked some highly romanticized Native American associations. This is indicated in the following passage from a woman's journal written during the 1850s.

These Indian dwellers in the bush are not now like the wild natives driven by the white men far away beyond the Mississippi. They pass a considerable portion of their time on the outskirts of towns, but in the autumn, like the fashionable denizens of European cities, they fly to the wilderness, erect their lodges on the shores of a lake or some gurgling stream. The men indulge their passion for shooting and fishing, while the [women] spread out their work-tables in those delicious glens which are richer in their ornament than any palace reared and decorated by mortal hand.

From Mademoiselle Rouche, *The Lady's Newspaper* (London), April 1859, quoted in Phillips 1998, p. 220 in *Uncommon Legacies: Native American Art from the Peabody Essex Museum*

### Discussion Questions and Activities for Middle School Students

- Why do you think the vision of the journal entry is romanticized?
- What do you think Native Americans used beaded pouches for in their own society?
- Have students sketch their own beaded purse or pouch design, or create their own.
- What fashion today is, or has been in the past, influenced by another culture?



*Necklace*

Possible Dakota (Eastern Sioux), Eastern Plains region, before 1826

Leather and bear claws

L 11 in. (28 cm)

Peabody Essex Museum; Gift of John Marsh, 1826 (E3678)

### 7. *Necklace*

Possible Dakota (Eastern Sioux), Eastern Plains region, before 1826

Leather and bear claws

L 11 in. (28 cm)

Peabody Essex Museum; Gift of John Marsh, 1826 (E3678)

For the Native peoples of western North America, the grizzly bear was a symbol of absolute strength, ferocity, and courage, both physical and spiritual. Through visions, warriors and shamans sought to gain some of the bear's spiritual power, which was employed for both healing and protection in battle. Bear skins and masks were worn by bear medicine men during their curing rites, while various bear motifs decorated shields, tepees, and robes.

Killing a grizzly bear, which could stand as high as nine feet tall and weigh a thousand pounds, was regarded as the equivalent of killing an enemy in battle. Only exceptional warriors and leaders were entitled to wear a necklace of grizzly bear claws, such as this one, which consists of fifteen claws strung together on a strip of leather. Some of the claws are drilled with a second hole, suggesting that the necklace once included decorative spacers between the claws. Elaborate claw necklaces with fur collars and beaded pendants were worn by leaders of the Prairies peoples, such as the Mesquakie (formerly known as Fox), who were frequenting the fur-trading post of Prairie du Chien, where the donor, John Marsh, engaged in commerce in the 1820s.

### Discussion Questions for Elementary and Middle School Students

- Ask students to write down words that come to mind when they think of a bear.
- Ask why they think a bear is a symbol of strength and courage.
- Discuss how this necklace indicates the prestige and power of its wearer.
- Discuss how Native American clothing and adornments may be considered as works of art. (This is a good discussion topic for high school students as well.)
- Note how a simple form such as this necklace can be as powerful as an elaborate one.



*Baby Carrier*

Chippewa-Ojibwa or Ottawa (Odawa), ca. 1835

Wood, cloth, quills, beads, leather, and shells

H 31 1/8 in. (79 cm)

Peabody Essex Museum; Ex A.B.C.F.M. Collection, 1946 (E25.409)

### 8. *Baby Carrier*

Chippewa-Ojibwa or Ottawa (Odawa), ca. 1835

Wood, cloth, quills, beads, leather, and shells

H 31 1/8 in. (79 cm)

Peabody Essex Museum; Ex A.B.C.F.M. Collection, 1946 (E25.409)

This baby carrier (cradleboard) may have been a personal possession of Mrs. Hester (Crooks) Boutwell. Born in 1817, Hester was the daughter of Abanokue (a Chippewa or Ottawa woman) and Ramsay Crooks, a successful fur trader who paid for her education at the Mackinac mission school. She later joined the church at La Pointe, on Madeline Island in Lake Superior, and taught at the Yellow Lake mission before marrying William T. Boutwell, a Protestant missionary, in 1834. The Boutwells had nine children together before Hester Boutwell died at the age of thirty-six in Stillwater, Minnesota.

In an Ojibwa family, a new or expectant mother might be honored by the gift of a newly made or heirloom baby carrier, called a *tibkinakan*. This highly effective childcare device was used during an infant's first year of life, beginning as soon as the umbilical cord had detached and the navel had healed. Strapped to the mother's back, the carrier facilitated infant transport and offered security and protection for the infant while freeing the mother's arms for her chores. The projecting bumper rail protected the baby's head, and could support a covering to block drafts or keep away insects; protective charms could also be attached here. Moreover, if the mother leaned the carrier against a tree and sat on the ground nearby, the infant could be kept at the mother's eye level, allowing the baby to gain the mother's attention and observe family members and their activities—important for the child's education and socialization. Grasping the rail by the top, the mother or older sibling could rock the infant when needed.

Lavishly decorated with a quilled bumper decoration, a beaded tendril motif, and strands of colorful beads, this practical object simultaneously represents the mother and child's link to their past and the heritage of their ancestors.

### Discussion Questions for Elementary, Middle School, and High School Students

- Ask your students to describe the patterns on the baby carrier and select one pattern to sketch.
- Ask them to identify which colors and shapes are repeated throughout.
- Discuss links to tradition, including the use of materials (quillwork, beads, shells), the act of passing down a family heirloom, and creating works of art using traditional techniques.



*Headdress*

Brazil, before ca. 1853

Fiber and feathers

19 ¼ in. H (49 cm)

Peabody Essex Museum; Gift of M. W. Shepard, 1853 (E6988)

## 9. Headdress

Brazil, before ca. 1853

Fiber and feathers

19 ¼ in. H (49 cm)

Peabody Essex Museum; Gift of M. W. Shepard, 1853 (E6988)

Among the Native peoples of South America, feathers were often regarded as an important expression of wealth. Feathers from many species of birds were meticulously selected and assembled to create headdresses such as this one; each species was associated with either men or women and that designation determined its placement on the headdress. This headdress, made predominantly from blue and red macaw plumes, closely resembles those made by the Kayapo, who live today among the upper tributaries of the Xingu River in the Amazon basin.

Ramiro Mathos, curator of South American Collections at Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, writes:

When referring to tropical forests, feathers immediately call to mind elaborate headdresses and other elegant and colorful adornments, especially materials used in rituals. For the Indians within the South American rain forest, oral narratives such as myths, stories, and legends serve to clarify the otherwise unexplainable. Feathers and birds are outstanding inspirational and artistic sources for many ancient and modern cultures. Feather art is often a striking aesthetic and cultural manifestation in South American lowland cultures. The stylistic and artistic development of lowland people is directly associated with the organization of their society and their system of beliefs. Amazonian indigenous communities have exploited the avian resources of their environments. Some birds, like parrots and macaws, are hunted primarily for their feathers; they may or may not be eaten. The possession and use of these feathers are intimately connected with one's personal and social identity. For the indigenous people who live within the tropical rain forest, feathers are a way of identifying with the appearance and/or behavioral characteristic of those animals. Feathers are also used as a component of spiritual medicine paraphernalia or amulets.

Amazonian Indians, through feather ornamentation, transfer many basic cultural ideas such as symbolism, myths, and identity from one generation to another and one group to another. Therefore, these objects serve as important instructional vehicles for the continuity of the indigenous lifestyle. It is remarkable how residents of small and isolated villages in the tropical rain forest continue this tradition along the patterns established by their ancestors. The transformation of natural resources into cultural adornments was and still is integral to many indigenous groups. The cultural legacy remains deeply rooted in their forest tradition, in spite of the modernization and destruction of their natural environment. For these contemporary South American lowlanders, this shared culture serves to reinforce their place in history and in their native habitat, and even more importantly, guides them into the future.

Considering the relationship of the multicolor feather attari to the spirits or to deities like the sun, one would expect the relative size and splendor of the feather crown to correlate with social status and personal wealth. In the case of the shaman, it may be degrees of esoteric knowledge of supernatural power and corresponding prestige; the crown may denote not so much his prestige as his connection to the feathered kingdom and his power as a weather prophet. In many cases shamans have an internal light that shines and unveils the intimate thoughts of all the people who speak to them. Their power and mission are always compared to an intense light that is invisible but perceptible through its effects. Feather work illustrates a theme we have seen throughout Amazonian cultures. Natural resources are essential for the vitality of the society, but they must be mastered, incorporated, and reconstituted in order to be usable by society. Many species of birds and their feathers are a part of Amazonian shamanism, but two major classes of birds have remained predominant: parrots and scarlet macaws.

In many cases, the dressing and donning of ornaments construct a "beautiful" person. Normal attire would consist of loin strings and loincloths, while ceremonial attire would be more complicated and in many cases replicate the cosmological levels from which the birds come. In the logic of symbolism, each of the creatures incarnates certain characteristics and powers of the domain. In this sense, birds are symbols of parts of the heavens and of the forest from which they come. All native people of South America utilize the avian resources of their environments not only for food, but also for the colorful feathers that play a vital role in the creation of festive garments for their rituals.

From *Uncommon Legacies: Native American Art from the Peabody Essex Museum*, pp. 239-40.

### Discussion Questions for Middle School and High School Students

- Discuss the importance of feathers for the Amazonian people and the transformation of natural resources into cultural adornments.
- Discuss the idea of the feather as a symbol of the bird that represents parts of the sky and forest and symbols in Native American art as an integral part of their culture.
- Have students compare the headdress with the necklace made of grizzly claws. Are there any similarities between the two adornments which come from two different cultures?
- Discuss the idea of an animal part as a symbol representing a spirit or idea.

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## Websites

<http://www.nmai.si.edu>

Website of the National Museum of the American Indian

<http://www.conexus.si.edu>

Conexus: The Resource Center's section of the National Museum of the American Indian's website

[http://www.education-world.com/a\\_lesson/lesson038.shtml](http://www.education-world.com/a_lesson/lesson038.shtml)

Ideas for the curriculum including lesson plans on Native American topics

<http://www.co.multnomah.or.us/lib/homework/natamhc.html>

A comprehensive, education-focused index of Native American sites

<http://www.germantown.k12.il.us/indians/intro.html>

A site designed by middle school teachers with facts, pictures, and links about the cultures of the North American Indian tribes.

<http://www.nativeweb.org/resources/education/k-12>

Education Resource database on Native cultural groups

<http://www.nihewan.org/curriculum.html>

Classroom projects based on Native American culture

<http://www.sondra.net/links/na-education.htm>

Native American Links

[http://www.peabody.harvard.edu/Lewis\\_and\\_Clark/](http://www.peabody.harvard.edu/Lewis_and_Clark/)

Online exhibition "The Ethnography of Lewis and Clark, Native American Objects and the American Quest for Commerce and Science"