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Important notice: Bolded words represent the main idea conveyed in each slide. Underlined words indicate other central ideas that should also be stressed in your presentation.

- This lesson is about art created by the indigenous peoples of the Plateau region.** It will introduce you to different kinds of traditional art made by these tribes, so that you can see there is a long tradition of art in these cultures. The main focus of this lesson is on two types of art made between the 1840s and the 1940s by Plateau women: twined bags (often called “cornhusk bags”) and beaded bags. You will learn how these bags were made, what they were used for, and how they were decorated. You will also learn that the fur trade and the creation of Indian reservations affected the lives of tribal peoples and that women artisans continued to make their art because it was an important part of their cultural identity.
- When Europeans and Euro-Americans came to the Plateau region, they brought many changes** to the tribal people who were already living there. These changes affected every aspect of tribal life. Europeans (and Americans and Canadians) also brought new materials—such as metals, glass beads, guns, and cloth—to trade with the tribes. As the tribes adjusted to these changes, indigenous people had to use skills like ADAPTATION and INGENUITY. For Plateau artists, this meant finding new ways to use their artistic skills to make art with new materials, like beads and trade cloth, while also preserving traditional skills and art that were central to their cultural heritage.

ADAPTATION is the process of modifying something for a new use or function, or changing a behavior or action in response to a change in circumstances.

INGENUITY means the application of creativity and imagination. Ingenuity is developing and carrying out new ideas, often by building on skills you already have.
- What is the Plateau region?** It is named for the Columbia River Plateau, which is one of its main geographical features. The Snake River (in the United States) and the Frasier River (in Canada) are also part of this region. The Plateau regions extends from the Rocky Mountains (on the east) to the Cascade Mountains (on the West), as far north as the sub-arctic and as far south as the Great Basin. The Plateau includes western Montana, northern Idaho, most of Oregon and Washington (except along the coast), and much of British Columbia.

Indigenous peoples of the Plateau are from many tribes, including: Cayuse, Coeur d’Alene, Cowlitz, Klickitat, Kootenai, Nespelem, Nez Perce, Pend d’Oreille, inland Salish, Sanpoil, Shuswap, Spokane, Umatilla, Walla Walla, Wenatchi, and Yakama. The Shoshone and Bannock tribes also share many Plateau cultural characteristics, as they lived where the Plateau, Great Basin, and Plains regions came together. These tribes are not all alike, but share many similar cultural characteristics, which is why they are considered “Plateau” tribes.

4. **Three of the Plateau tribes are located in western Montana.** These are the Salish, Pend d'Oreille, and Kootenai. Other Plateau tribes, such as the Nez Perce, Shoshone, and Bannock, often hunted and traded in what is now Montana.

The **Pend d'Oreille** tribe (also called Kalispel) also lives in northern Idaho.

The **Salish** tribe used to live in the Bitterroot Valley and their territory extended to both sides of the Rocky Mountains. Sometimes they are called the "Flathead" tribe, a name used for them by other tribes who used to practice a form of skull-shaping that made their own heads look longer—by comparison, they thought the heads of the Salish and Pend d'Oreille looked flat.

The **Kootenai** tribe lives in Montana, as well as Idaho and British Columbia. Their language is unlike any other language spoken in the Western hemisphere and they may be related to indigenous people of central Siberia. The Salish called the Kootenai "Lake People" or "Water People" because the Kootenai built sturgeon-nosed canoes and used them for travel.

Some of the Pend d'Oreille, Salish and Kootenai people now live on the Flathead Reservation, but their original homelands were much larger.

5. **In general, the tribes of the Plateau region were fishing cultures** (although the Kootenai, Salish and Nez Perce also hunted buffalo, and shared many characteristics with Plains tribes and at times lived east of the Rockies). Because of the abundance of foods available to them, most Plateau tribes had semi-permanent communities at seasonal fishing sites and returned to specific places each year during the appropriate season for harvesting plant foods and fibers. Salmon, sturgeon, and other fish were central to their diet, as were camas, bitterroot, and berries.

Plateau life differed from life on the Plains in many ways. For example, food was very plentiful on the Plateau, so warfare and raiding were not as common as on the Plains.

Like their Plains counterparts, some Plateau tribes, such as the Nez Perce and Cayuse, acquired horses in the early 1700s and this enabled them to extend their hunting areas and develop trade relations with other tribes in the Great Basin and Plains. (The Appaloosa is a Nez Perce breed of horse.)

6. **Beauty was an important element of Plateau cultures.** For this reason, these tribes had many forms of art. Household items—such as utensils, dishes, tools, baskets, harvest bags and personal belongings—were not just functional (useful), but aesthetically pleasing (beautiful to look at) as well. Some of the art forms common to Plateau tribes are:

Carving—elaborate carving of stone and bighorn sheep horns for dishes, utensils, tools; their carving style is generally representational/realistic, with people and animals as frequent motifs. (*A motif is the main idea or theme in a design.*)

Basketry—Plateau tribes made coiled baskets of cedar root and beargrass for food harvest, storage, and cooking; and twined baskets for hats, smaller baskets, cornhusk bags (also called "flat bags"). They used plant fibers—cedar root and bark, beargrass, cattail, and Indian hemp—to produce these bags; and they decorated them in geometric patterns, created by dyeing the same plant fibers with mineral and botanical dyes.

Leather work—tanned hide was used for clothing; rawhide was used to make parfleches containers (often painted), and saddles were made from leather.

- To decorate or embellish these items, Plateau people used media (materials) from their environment as well as ones they acquired from intertribal trade.** Some of these artistic media were dyed plant fibers, several kinds of shells, bone and shell beads, porcupine quills (less common than on Plains-Indian-made items), and mineral paints and botanical (plant) dyes.
7. **Parfleche containers** are made of rawhide—often elk or buffalo hide—and were often used to store dried meat. They are common to Plateau and Plains tribes and other regions. The rawhide is soaked and scraped, then folded and painted. One style of parfleche common to many tribes of the Northwest are tri-folded envelopes. The geometric designs painted on this parfleche envelope is similar to designs used by tribes such as the Blackfeet and Gros Ventre (White Clay) of the Northern Plains. A standard household item of great utility, parfleche containers were regularly given as wedding presents. Because of its durability, rawhide was also used to make quivers for arrows and (later) for storing documents and papers.
 8. **Coiled baskets** were a specialty of the Plateau and served multiple daily uses, like berry harvesting and cooking. (Coiled means the plant fibers are twisted together to make the basket.) These baskets varied in size, and were often cylindrical in shape, but some were conical; they could be tall or quite shallow. Geometric patterns are a common design, for example, the stair-step or zigzag pattern seen in this photograph of a wide bowl-shaped coiled basket from the early 20th century. The dark fibers are cedar, and the pale golden bands are beargrass.
 9. **Twined bags**, also called “flat bags,” demonstrate the variety of geometric patterns and shapes in Plateau arts. (Twined means knotted or woven by hand.) These bags were often created using patterns in shades of brown and gold (depending on the plant fiber). Women also applied their knowledge of plants to create a variety of botanical (plant) dyes from barks, roots, and berries. Cornhusk, beargrass, and apocynum (Indian hemp) were often used in creating these bags, as it was readily available and relatively easy to dye. Both coiled and twined bags required harvesting a substantial amount of the required plant and careful soaking of the plant fibers to soften them prior to use, in addition to the making of dyes and coloring the materials. The wide bands of un-dyed fiber at the top and bottom of the bag are typical of the Plateau style and are probably reinforced with root fibers for strength and durability.
 10. **Cornhusk bags** were mainly used for gathering and storing edible roots and bulbs, like bitterroot and camas, but they are also a means for demonstrating one’s cultural creativity and displaying beauty. Design patterns and motifs could be community-specific, generalized throughout all or most of the region, or specific to a single maker. Diamonds, chains of triangles, stars, flowers, and even animal shapes are frequent motifs. Botanically-derived colors include reds, pinks, yellows, browns, and violet. This image shows the reverse side of the bag seen in the previous slide. Nearly all Plateau bags have different designs on each side, allowing for greater application and expression of the artist’s creative abilities. Because the bags are made all in one piece, rather than two sides seamed together, the women who make them have to work in two design patterns at once, adding to the complexity of their creation.
 11. **Imbrication** is often called **false embroidery** because it looks like embroidery, but instead

of the designs being added in top of a finished bag, they are created during the making of the bag. This technique was used to make the designs on this cornhusk bag. The pattern on one side is made by alternating groups of red and blue triangles. Notice how this wraps around the edges slightly onto the opposite side of the bag—this is because the bag is constructed as a single piece. You can see on the *inside* of the bag how the dyed fibers are knotted to create the star pattern on the other side. The creation of patterns using the false embroidery technique requires mathematical precision and patterning that women had to understand by heart and through much practice, and knowledge of different patterns was a valuable skill in and of itself.

At this time (about 1880) women still used naturally dyed plant fibers, but commercial dyes were also available to them after about 1890. Wool yarn, another store-bought item, was also used for false embroidery, but did not hold up over time as well as the stronger plant fibers.

12. **Recycling** is *essential* in societies where everything is made by hand and requires many hours of labor and much concentrated effort. Developing ways to re-use materials made the production of goods more efficient and less wasteful of materials and labor. When a cornhusk bag got worn down or torn, women refashioned the good parts into smaller items, such as belt bags. Like the larger cornhusk bags, these smaller bags were decorated with designs, because the art itself was a marker of cultural identity. Notice that these bags still exhibit their designs in a balanced way. Belt bags attached to a person's belt with leather strings and both men and women used them as wallets or purses.

13. **Plateau tribes traded large harvest bags to other tribes**, who may have not had the same resources to make them or who preferred the Plateau craftsmanship and style. This Plateau bag, shown front and back, was acquired by a white rancher on the Crow Reservation between 1890 and 1930, and was probably a trade item from earlier years. It contains jute fibers in addition to cornhusk and naturally dyed wool yarn for the imbrication. Other bags contained apocynum (Indian hemp) in addition to cornhusk to make them stronger.

Intertribal trade was often on a small scale, between family groups or individuals, but there were also large trade centers on established routes where tribes from many regions would meet—sometimes annually—to trade, intermarry, and share news. The Plateau region was an especially busy place in terms of trade with tribes from the Great Basin region to the south and the Plains to the east. Some tribes, like the Nez Perce and Shoshone tribes, who had well-established trade relations with Plains tribes, also traded Plains goods to other Plateau tribes.

In addition to trading material goods, tribes and individuals traded ideas, including ideas about artistic design, composition, and technique. Over time some tribes within a given region “specialized” in certain items, design compositions, or techniques, and other tribes could recognize their work.

14. **Glass beads of European origin came to the Plateau region long before Europeans** or Euro-Americans did, traveling along the trade routes, but at first they were scarce. The Cree traded beads to the Kootenai as early as 1700. These “pony beads” were available at first in a limited quantity and small range of colors. By the mid-1800s, however, smaller “seed beads” became readily available in a great variety of colors and were widely traded and purchased between tribes and traders and among tribes.

There are several types of seed beads which are often defined by their luster (brightness). The pink, blue, and red beads in the upper picture are faceted or “cut” beads.

They have flat sides that reflect light, creating a twinkling appearance. The white beads (below) are semi-transparent or translucent cut beads that were common in the mid-1800s, but are rarely seen on beadwork after 1900 until recent years. The blue-gray ones were called “Russian” beads, perhaps because they first appeared in the West with a Russian fur trader. Most of the seed beads available through trading posts were opaque (solidly colored). Some of these beads had a slightly murky hue, such as the yellow ones in the flower, and they are referred to as “greasy” beads.

15. **When beads were added to the available artistic resources, inter-tribal influences on technique and composition** became even more apparent on the Plateau. The companies who controlled the fur trade, such as the Hudson Bay Company, sent their Métis (mixed heritage) employees west to establish trading posts and attract business. The Métis were of French, Scottish and Chippewa and/or Cree heritage, usually spoke two or three languages, and were extraordinary bead-workers. When they arrived at the Plateau in the early 1800s, the Métis had already had access to European beads for 200 years, and they brought their designs, skills and beaded clothing with them.

Métis beadwork is distinctly botanical, often with tri-foliolate (three-leaved) designs of leaves and flowers. Often the colors are not realistic, perhaps because these were the only colors of beads available to the artist at the time, but maybe realism in terms of color was not what the artists wanted to create. Some Plateau beadwork has similar artistic qualities, especially among tribes of the northeastern Plateau region.

Like the belt bags made from worn cornhusk bags, small pouches such as the one on the top (shown front and back) were often made from recycled materials, like clothing. The bag on the left is from the Flathead Reservation. It was made from a uniform sleeve, maybe from a soldier at one of the forts in Montana. The scalloping technique in white beads around the star is a technique much used by the Métis of Chippewa (Ojibway) descent. Many Métis, as well as Chippewas and Crees, settled on the Flathead Reservation in its early years and intermarried with the Salish, Pend d’Oreille and Kootenai living there.

16. **Early Plateau foliate and floral designs** often featured nearly symmetrical floral motifs in unrealistic colors, with stems branching out laterally, as the two bags pictured here show. Like the fur trade tribes, some of the Plateau tribes were not picky about colors in the mid-19th century. Many of their beaded items from this period use many colors in one design. The Kootenai often preferred dark green backgrounds.

17. **To create these designs, the artists used beading techniques called overlay technique and two-needle appliqué**. These techniques enabled the artist to make tightly beaded lines. Because beading allowed the artist to create curvilinear shapes, the designs did not have to be strictly geometrical. Twining and false embroidery limited the artist to straight lines, sharp angles, and rectilinear shapes. The geometric designs, such as the flower motif above, remained abstract. With beads, however, the artist could make naturalistic shapes, and the popular flower motif became vividly realistic. Women quickly learned how to bead flowers that were so realistic in appearance that they were identifiable as a specific species, such as this iris.

18. **Plateau women continued to use traditional motifs, like stars and flowers**, on the twined and beaded bags they made in the 20th century. Cornhusk bags were still made for harvest, but after 1900 they were increasingly made as handbags to be used as an accessory to ceremonial dress. They were prized as heirlooms, just as many beaded bags were. These two

women are the daughter (left) and wife (right) of Sheta-mo-on-e, who was both Yakama and Umatilla. You can see that, in 1900, the traditional twined hat and bag are still part of cultural dress, as are the beaded hand bag and the belt bag with a beaded rose motif. By this time, beadwork had been totally incorporated into the aesthetic of Plateau tribes. (A “cultural aesthetic” is a culturally specific sense of beauty and design.) **Beading was incorporated into the cultural tradition of beauty and the expression of artistic talent so important to Plateau women, and over time it became representative of who they were as artists and as citizens of their tribal nations.**

19. **Plateau bead artists soon developed their own style of beadwork**, building on two influences: the sense of balance in their geometric designs and the lively representation of flowers exhibited in Métis beadwork. To these influences they added a third element—the realistic representation of bird and plant species from their own environment.

The bag on the left was created around 1880 using the translucent beads preferred at that time. You can see that the birds have natural colors in addition to realistic shapes, as do the flowers. The background of this bag is done in a beading style called contour beading—the artist first created the items in the foreground and then beaded the background in lines that bend around the shapes of the birds and plants, so that the background enhances the shapes in the foreground. Contour beading can be difficult, as the artist has to determine how to make the shapes fit together in a balanced way, and when it is done well (as it is in this design), it creates a sense of movement that enlivens the overall composition.

The bag on the right, which dates to about 1890, is another example of the ability that Plateau women achieved in realistic representation. The yellow flowers at the bottom are the glacier lilies that grow in abundance in mountain meadows of the northern Plateau. At the top of this bag, songbirds are perched on a flowering branch, perhaps service berry or wild plum. These pieces of beaded art are examples of how the art of the Plateau became even more representative of their own region as women created realistic compositions that depicted elements from their environment.

20. **From the 1880s through the 1920s many Indian children (even young adults) were sent to boarding schools** because the federal government wanted to make them more like white Americans. The education of Indian girls and young women centered primarily on domestic chores: sewing, laundry, cleaning, and food preparation. Embroidery was very popular at this time and reflected the Victorian style of the era. Victorian designs have a “Valentine” quality to them. Flowery compositions such as bouquets and May Day baskets were frequent themes. This “look” (or “aesthetic”) was adopted into the design repertoire of Plateau beadwork. At this time, beaded bags were created for two functions: first as artistic heirlooms displayed at cultural gatherings and, second, as items to sell to white collectors. Plateau women applied their ingenuity to making beaded bags that appealed to a white American sense of beauty or aesthetics.

Compare the two bags on the left. You can see that the bag with the pansy on it still looks new—probably because it was created for sale to a non-Indian. (It is from the collection of Fred Mitchell, who collected over 650 beaded Plateau bags.) On the reverse side of this bag is a beaded illustration of Santa on a sled—a very “American” theme! The rose bag above it is worn at the edges, indicating that it was well used and likely not made for sale. It also has a shoelace for a handle, probably because the original leather or cloth handle wore out. This image is the other side of the bag with the irises you saw earlier in the presentation, as the practice of creating different designs on each side of the bag continued.

The bag in the center shows the May Day basket design typical of Victorian embroidery and postcards of that era. The reverse side is twined cornhusk with a geometric pattern. Perhaps the woman who created this bag wanted to demonstrate that she was both a modern American woman *and* a traditional Plateau woman, or maybe she wanted the bag to appeal to collectors who wanted a bag with a familiar Victorian composition as well as an “authentic” “Indian” look.

21. **Many Indians joined the U.S. military at the start of World War I** and fought overseas, even though the U.S. government did not consider Indians in general to be American citizens until 1924, when the Indian Citizenship Act passed. This era was a very difficult time for Indian people in this country. They had been stripped of their homelands, their cultures were being systematically torn apart, and they were frequently prevented from practicing their indigenous customs or teaching these ways to their children. In addition, most of them were impoverished (very poor). Joining the military of the government that treated them so wrongly may seem strange, but in reality it was a way in which Indian men (and, in World War II, women) demonstrated that they identified as both Indians and Americans.

Plateau beadwork from this time reflects the patriotism of American Indians, as these two pieces illustrate. The American flag and bald eagle were widely utilized motifs from 1915 through the 1940s.

22. **Plateau beadwork of the mid-20th century** reveals an explosion of new motifs in ever-more realistic depictions of culture and identity. The work from this period is ingenious in its detail and style. **For the first time, Plateau Indians themselves became a central motif in their beadwork**, as you can see in these examples. One reason for the “Indian person” motif was the Pendleton Rodeo in Oregon, a huge cultural event attended by whites and Indians alike and where many Indian cowboys competed. Popular culture in the U.S. tended at the time to glamorize a generalized “Indian” aesthetic while also heartily embracing a romantic notion of cowboy culture. You will also see in beadwork of this era a lot of realistic wildlife—especially deer and elk—but the desire to fill any otherwise empty space with flowers carries over from the Victorian era of earlier decades. Horses, which had been popular motifs since the turn of the century, appear very real. Look at the saddle in the central image—the level of detail here is amazing. Other interesting aspects of this particular bag are the more traditional geometric designs in each corner—similar to some twined/cornhusk handbags—and the long fringes decorated with shells.

The little “elephant” bag is intriguing (interesting). We do not know who made it or where it came from, but it was made in about 1930-1940. It looks like a design made for a child, maybe a kid who learned about elephants at school or saw one in a circus or zoo. In any case, it eventually ended up in the collection of one of Montana’s governors.

23. **The Salish women in this picture are Josephine Camille and her daughter, Lucy Pierre, from the Flathead Reservation.** This photo was taken in July 1906, probably at the Arlee pow wow, as they are dressed in their regalia and carrying their beautifully made handbags—as an expression of “This is who we are.” You can see that the pattern on the cornhusk bag at the left—one small star/flower in each corner and a much larger star/flower in the center—is the same pattern on the bag Josephine Camille is holding (which was made four decades earlier)...so many of the traditional design patterns persisted well into the twentieth century. Some are still being created today, as traditional arts are being revived. Lucy Pierre holds a beaded bag with a leaf motif, similar in style to the one

on the belt pouch at the right. Notice that she also has a belt pouch with a rose beaded on it. During the reservation era, beaded artwork had become firmly anchored in tribal aesthetics and undeniably an artistic form of Plateau cultural expression, thanks to the skill, resourcefulness, and creativity of Indian women.

24. **Here we have a wonderfully detailed bag that shows at its center a Plateau woman—perhaps the artist herself—in full reservation-era regalia:** twined beargrass-and-cedar hat with typical zigzag pattern, abalone shell earrings, a green wool trade-cloth dress with fully beaded yoke and abalone shells, a calico cotton blouse, and a beaded belt and sash. On either side of her are two long-stemmed flowers similar to the old Métis or Chippewa style. The pale blue background, a favorite among western Plateau tribes as well as with the Crow, is tightly beaded in two-needle appliqué, and the bright red and green triangles of the border point in toward the woman, who emerges in front of them as a symbol of the beauty that is so much a part of her cultural heritage.

Made around 1940, this bag was beaded with a lot of care, skill, and talent. Such work is only achieved by a woman who is dedicated to her art and who put an incredible number of hours into creating designs and developing artistic skills. For an artist such as the one who made this, beading is part of who she is as an Indian artist from her tribal nation.

In an interview for the book, *A Song to the Creator*, Joanne Bigcrane, a Pend d'Oreille artist who does both beadwork and quillwork, talks about how art is an extension of a woman's self and an expression of her culture, saying:

“To be a good woman, you paid attention to what you were doing, and you did it right, meticulously. I learned what those aesthetics were, and still had been when I was a child. Nowadays people feel... ‘Well, that doesn’t matter.’ But if you want to follow the traditional values, yes, it does matter. Following traditional aesthetics means you have to strive... You have to strive in a sense not for personal worthiness, but for an honoring statement to the Creator for what He has given you, to give respect to everything He has provided.

“Everything that I try to make, I try to make with the utmost quality in mind. I don’t approve of making something with a frivolous attitude. Because no matter where that piece goes, I go with it, because I put something of myself into it...”

25. (Credits)—This presentation was created by Laura Ferguson for the Montana Historical Society, in conjunction with the temporary exhibit of the Fred Mitchell Collection of beaded Plateau bags, May 14, 2009 — October 3, 2009. Copyright 2009, Montana Historical Society.

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