

A Beautiful Tradition

Adaptation and Ingenuity in a Century of Plateau Womens’s Art

Created by Laura Ferguson for the Montana Historical Society, 2009



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Grade levels

9th–12th grade

Subjects

Art/Art History, Social Studies (*Native Americans, Montana or American History*)

Time for Completion

Two 50-minute class periods (*or 1 class period and 1 homework assignment*)

Overview

This unit provides an introduction to the art of indigenous peoples of the Plateau region, including three tribes currently in Montana and others who historically used this area for hunting and trade. It includes discussion of Plateau art forms and artistic media that preceded beading, as well as a brief history of the incorporation of beads into tribal art. Students will look at styles, techniques, themes, and changes in Plateau beadwork through a visual gallery of artifacts. A comparison is made between traditional Plateau cornhusk-style bags and beaded bags, in order to illustrate continuity of techniques and aesthetic styles, while emphasizing changing themes, materials and motifs. For comparative purposes, occasional contrasts to Plains-style arts are pointed out so that distinctions can be made.

The purpose of this lesson is three-fold: 1) to demonstrate the continuity of cultural expression and esthetics during a century of rapid change brought by colonialism and the reservation system; 2) to show how indigenous artists adapted traditional skills to accommodate changes in resources, local economies and

historical circumstances; and 3) to illustrate the processes by which an introduced medium such as glass beads can be incorporated into indigenous cultures in such a way that the medium becomes an authentic form of native cultural and artistic expression.

Standards

Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians

EU 1. There is great diversity among the twelve sovereign tribes of Montana in their languages, cultures, histories, and governments. Each tribe has a distinct and unique cultural heritage that contributes to modern Montana.

EU 2. Just as there is great diversity among tribal nations, there is great diversity among individual American Indians as identity is developed, defined, and redefined by entities, organizations, and people. There is no generic American Indian.

EU 3. The ideologies of Native traditional beliefs and spirituality persist into modern day life as tribal cultures, traditions, and languages are still practiced by many American Indian people and are incorporated into how tribes govern and manage their affairs. Additionally, each tribe has its own oral histories, which are as valid as written histories. These histories predate the “discovery” of North America.

Montana State Social Studies Standards

SS.G.9-12.3 Use maps, satellite images, photographs, and other representations to explain relationships between the locations of places and regions and their political, cultural, and economic dynamics.

SS.G.9-12.4 Analyze relationships and interactions within and between human and physical systems to explain reciprocal influences that occur among them, including American Indians.

SS.H.9-12.1. Analyze how unique circumstances of time, place, and historical contexts shape individuals' lives.

SS.H.9-12.2. Analyze change and continuity in historical eras in US and world history.

SS.H.9-12.10. Analyze perspectives of American Indians in US history.

Montana Arts Standards

9th-12th grade, Visual Arts, 11. Compare uses of art in a variety of personal, societal, cultural, and historical contexts.

Objectives

In this unit, students will be able to:

1. Locate the Plateau region on a map.
2. Identify several Plateau tribes, including three still living in Montana (Salish, Kootenai, and Pend d'Oreille). Identify intermontane tribes, such as the Nez Perce, who hunted and traded in Montana.
3. Understand some of the regional and cultural differences between Plateau and Plains tribes. Make a connection between these cultural attributes differences and art.
4. Identify different types of Plateau art forms and how they are or were made, including, indigenous materials and introduced materials, with specific focus on cornhusk-style bags and beaded bags.
5. Recognize the various skills, designs, and utilization of available resources evident in, traditional Plateau art forms, which extends to the incorporation of beads into tribal artwork.

6. Identify various compositional themes, design types, and techniques in Plateau, beadwork, and define various terms related to three-dimensional art and to beadwork in particular.
7. Gain an introductory understanding of how European and American colonialism, in the West initiated changes in daily life that in turn required adaptation and ingenuity on behalf of indigenous artists.
8. Observe some of the changes in Plateau art, specifically beadwork, between the 1880s and 1940s, including changes in media, function, style, and composition.
9. Understand how introduced media (beads) have been incorporated into indigenous cultures in a manner that allows for authentic continuity of an indigenous cultural aesthetic.
10. Appreciate the role of art and artistic expression in and to Native American cultures past and present, and understand the importance of art to cultural and personal identity.

Materials Needed

- Internet access (needed if accessing additional resources or complementary curricula). Maps could be downloaded and printed, if necessary.
- "A Beautiful Tradition" online resources, which include [PowerPoint slides](#), a [lesson plan](#), a [PowerPoint script](#) and a [worksheet](#).
- Digital projector for viewing the accompanying PowerPoint, or a computer lab if students are viewing the slideshow individually. (The slideshow could also be printed and hard copies distributed to the students, but the images are much better viewed on a computer in color. Additionally, this allows students to zoom in on details.)

- [“Tradition, Design, Color: Plateau Indian Beaded Bags from the Fred Mitchell Collection”](#) – a catalog produced to accompany a temporary exhibit of Plateau women artists’ beaded bags, 1880-1940, at the Montana Historical Society, Helena, Montana, May 14, 2009 – October 3, 2009. To obtain complimentary copies of this exhibit catalog for use in the classroom, contact the Education Division of the Montana Historical Society at (406) 444-4740. This Lesson Plan is designed to be used in conjunction with this exhibit catalog; however, if desired, this unit may also be used as a stand-alone lesson without the catalog.

Suggested Reading

If you can, please obtain or borrow through interlibrary loan the following book and have your class read these selected pages.

A Song to the Creator: Traditional Arts of Native American Women of the Plateau, edited by Lillian A. Ackerman, copyright 1995 University of Oklahoma Press. Read **pages 5-8**: (“Introduction” and “First Contact and History”) and **pages 106-117** (“Beadwork and Cultural Identity on the Plateau”). Be sure to observe the photographs and accompanying descriptive captions. Optional reading: **pages 9-15**: “Traditional Plateau Women’s Roles and Life Cycle,” and “Contemporary Plateau Women.” Total reading time is 30-45 minutes..

Procedures

1. If including the suggested readings, these may be done prior to or after the PowerPoint.
2. View the PowerPoint slide show, narrating from the text. You might print the text for student reference as well, as it will be useful in completing the worksheet.
3. View and locate on a Map: Plateau region; Salish, Kootenai, and Pend d’Oreille tribes; Nez Perce traditional area; their neighboring tribes (Note: all of the books listed under Suggested Reading and Additional Resources have good maps.).
4. Have each student choose one piece of art to analyze. You may choose to print these.
5. Complete the worksheets provided in this lesson. This can be done as a take-home assignment if students are able to print in color the image they chose to use for the analysis component of the worksheet. [Answer keys](#) are provided.