

A Beautiful Tradition

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

Created by Laura Ferguson for the Montana Historical Society, 2009



Revised 10/9/2024

Grade levels

4th–5th grade

Subject

Art (could also use in Social Studies, MT history, Native American studies)

Time for Completion

Two 45-minute class periods (or 1 class period and 1 homework assignment)

Overview

This unit provides an introduction to art of the Plateau region, primarily focusing on twined bags and beaded bags. It includes information on traditional Plateau art forms and artistic media that preceded beading; a brief history of the incorporation of beads into tribal art; and a look at styles, techniques, themes, and changes in Plateau beadwork through a visual gallery (PowerPoint slides) of artifacts. A comparison is made between traditional Plateau cornhusk-style bags and beaded bags in order to illustrate continuity of techniques and esthetic styles and motifs, as well as to reveal changes. Occasional contrasts to Plains-style arts are pointed out so that distinctions can be made.

The purpose of this lesson is threefold: 1) to demonstrate the continuity of cultural expression and aesthetics during a century of rapid change brought by colonialism and the reservation system; 2) to show how indigenous cultures 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 indige-

nous cultures in such a manner that the medium becomes an authentic form of native cultural and artistic expression that is important to cultural identity.

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.

Montana State Social Studies Standards

SS.G.4.2. Identify and label the tribes in Montana and their indigenous territories, and current locations.

SS.G.4.3. Investigate the physical, political, and cultural characteristics of places, regions, and people in Montana.

SS.H.4.1. Understand tribes in Montana have their own unique histories.

SS.H.4.3. Explain how Montana has changed over time given its cultural diversity and how this history impacts the present.

SS.H.5.3. Identify roles of individuals and groups and their impact on United States and tribal historical events.

SS.H.5.4. Understand the unique historical perspectives of American Indians.

Montana Arts Standards

4th grade, Visual Arts, 11. Interpret artworks through observation and information about context.

5th grade, Visual Arts, 8. Analyze use of structure, context, and visual elements to convey ideas and mood in artworks.

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).
3. Understand some of the regional and cultural differences between Plateau and Plains tribes.
4. Identify different types of Plateau art forms and artistic media.
5. Observe the continuity in artisans' utilization of available resources evident in traditional Plateau art, which extends to the incorporation of beads.
6. Identify compositional themes, design types, and techniques in Plateau beadwork, and define terms related to three-dimensional art and to beadwork and twined bags in particular.
7. Gain an introductory understanding of how changes in tribal economies and lifestyles—resulting from Euro-American incursion into the West initiated changes in art (media, styles, composition function, etc.).
8. Recognize some of those changes in Plateau art, specifically between the 1880s and 1940s.

9. Understand how introduced materials, especially glass beads, have been incorporated into indigenous cultures in a manner that allows for continuity of an indigenous cultural aesthetic.
10. Appreciate the role of art and artistic expression in and to Native American peoples (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) 444-4789. 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.

Procedures

1. Print the WORKSHEETS and TEXT applicable to your grade level.
2. Show the PowerPoint slides to the students, narrating from the text.
3. Have the students complete the worksheets. You may want to print copies of the items they choose to assess.
4. [Answer keys](#) are provided.

Additional Resources

Montana Museums

Montana museums make great fieldtrips! These are a few with native artifacts, including beadwork:

- Montana Historical Society Museum, 225 N. Roberts St., Helena Montana, 59620. Phone (406) 444-4740 or visit <http://mhs.mt.gov/>
- People's Center, Pablo, Montana.
- Museum of the Plains Indian, Browning, Montana.
- Fort Belknap Cultural Museum, Harlem, MT (Gros Ventre and Assiniboiné).