

AMERICAN INDIAN ART AND ICONOGRAPHY

“If archaeological material is recognizably primarily and deliberately symbolic . . . then interpretations of past belief systems are possible.”

– Patty Jo Watson (1984)

American Indian Art and Iconography highlights a selection of American Indian artifacts from the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum's collection, dating from the 11th to the early 20th century. These and other objects on loan encompass important works from a variety of North American regions, including the Southwest, the Plains, the Woodlands, and the Arctic. The exhibition is presented in conjunction with the course American Indian Art and Iconography, which explores the meaning and function of the iconography found on American Indian objects.

This display was organized collaboratively by Carol Diaz-Granados, research associate, Department of Anthropology; James R. Duncan, former director, Missouri State Museum; and Carol Epstein, MLA, Anthropology/Ancient Studies, and member, National Council of Arts and Sciences.

Prior to the advent of the written word, many cultural materials (pottery, basketry, stonework, metalwork, clothing) were encoded with icons in order to indicate their intended use. This imagery also served as a mnemonic device to tell a story, lead a ceremony, or perform a ritual. American Indian oral traditions—stories about nature, supernatural beings, and events handed down from generation to generation—give insight into these images, many of which have retained their meaning for centuries and are still in use today. Some of these symbols are believed to be laden with power. Often, to possess the object with its iconography is to possess the power the symbols represent.

The artifacts in this gallery are organized into sections that coincide with the basic levels of the American Indian cosmos: Upper World, Middle World, and Lower World.

SELECTED WORKS

Unknown (Sioux, Plains, United States)
Headdress, c. 1890

Ermine hide and trade cloth with eagle, hawk, and raven feathers, glass beads, horsehair, and paint
University acquisition

The man who wore this feather headdress, or war bonnet, would have been known for his military achievement, personal valor, and leadership. Each feather represents an honor earned in war, and the headdress in its totality symbolizes the owner's bravery, political stature, and responsibility to the people. On each side of the headdress, the dragonfly and zigzag symbols (representations of lightning) signify bravery in war, as do the strips of ermine fur attached to the cap. The trailers of this long headdress iconographically relate to a comet—the star that travels—thus connecting the object to the Upper World.

Unknown (Sioux, Plains, United States)

Blanket Strip, c. 1880

Hide with glass beads

University acquisition

Vibrantly colored, beaded, leather strips such as this one were attached to woolen blankets and often included important iconographical symbols. The equilateral cross-in-circle symbol on this blanket strip, with its rayed circumference, functions as a graphic locative for the Upper World in the multileveled American Indian worldview.

Unknown (Mississippian, Dunklin County, Missouri, Woodlands, United States)

Repoussé Plaques, c. 1200–1400

Copper

Gifts of J. Max Wulfing, 1937

The Mississippian copper repoussé plaques feature images of the “Birdman,” a hawk or hawklike figure with anthropomorphic attributes, such as a headdress and ear ornaments. These signify that the Birdman is of the spirit world—a supernatural being that originates in the Upper World. For Mississippian culture, as well as for many Native American groups today, the hawk, which, like the eagle, flies highest in the sky, is related to sun power and the Creator. Copper plaques such as these were used as frontlets on headdresses, as well as on sacred poles and other ritual paraphernalia, and would have brought associations of Upper World power to whomever or whatever they decorated.

Unknown (Mississippian, Meppen Mound Site, Illinois, Woodlands, United States)

Long-nosed Maskette Ear Ornaments, c. 1000–1400

Copper

Charles Adam Estate Collection

The Mississippian long-nosed maskettes were worn on the ears as “ear ornaments” to distinguish elite males during elaborate “adoption” rituals. These ear ornaments are indicative of the wearer's descent from the principal spirit ancestor, First

TEACHING GALLERY

MILDRED LANE KEMPER ART MUSEUM
WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

AMERICAN INDIAN ART AND ICONOGRAPHY (con't)

Man, who came from the Sun. The original red color of the copper would have symbolized sun and fire—elements belonging to the Upper World that were highly revered by tribes of the Mississippian region.

Unknown (Arapaho, Plains, United States)
Parfleche (Rawhide Container), c. 1880–1900
Rawhide with commercial paint
University acquisition

The parfleche—a container of folded or sewn rawhide adorned with drawn and painted designs over the exposed surfaces—was traditionally created by women and used for the storage and transport of families' belongings. These light, unbreakable, weather-resistant objects were integral to the nomadic life of Plains and Plateau peoples. The blue and red triangular shapes forming the principal elements of the design can hold different meanings depending on the intent of the maker; today, without her explanation, the symbolic meaning is lost.

Unknown (Mississippian, Pemiscot Bayou, Missouri, Woodlands, United States)
Old Woman Pot, c. 1450–1650
Ceramic
Charles Adam Estate Collection

The Mississippian “Old Woman pots” depict a supernatural being who is part of many oral traditions and is known by various names such as Earth Mother, Corn Woman, and First Woman. Old Woman pots have been excavated from burials in southeast Missouri, northeast Arkansas, and a few contiguous (eastern) states. The Old Woman pots, once thought to represent figures with tuberculosis, are now recognized as representing the earth, traditionally perceived as a female deity. First Woman is the spiritual embodiment of the fecund earth; her function is “mother of all things.”

Edward Sheriff Curtis (American, 1868–1952)
Selections from *The North American Indian* (1907–30)
Photogravures
Gift of Stephen Bunyard in honor of Megan D. Swider, 2005

This Teaching Gallery display also includes nine photogravures by Edward S. Curtis from the collection of the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum. These images were originally created for his twenty-volume set *The North American Indian*, published between 1907 and 1930. The photogravures on view complement the American Indian artifacts by showing many of them in context or by depicting

figures or daily activities that offer a fuller picture of American Indian life and culture.

SELECTED RESOURCES

Diaz-Granados, Carol and James R. Duncan, *Petroglyphs and Pictographs of Missouri* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000).

Dubin, Lois Sherr, *North American Indian Jewelry and Adornment: From Prehistory to Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999).

Duncan, James R. and Carol Diaz-Granados, “Of Masks and Myths,” *Midcontinental Journal of Archaeology* 25, no. 1 (2000): 1–26.

Lankford, George E., F. Kent Reilly III, and James F. Garber, *Visualizing the Sacred: Cosmic Visions, Regionalism, and the Art of the Mississippian World* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

Reilly III, F. Kent and Paul F. Garber, *Ancient Objects and Sacred Realms: Interpretations of Mississippian Iconography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009).

Townsend, Richard and Robert V. Sharp, *Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand: American Indian Art of the Ancient Midwest and South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

Watson, Patty Jo, Steven A. LeBlanc, and Charles L. Redman, *Archaeological Explanation: The Scientific Method in Archaeology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

RELATED EVENTS

Wednesday, February 17, 5 pm:

Gallery Talk on *American Indian Art and Iconography* with Carol Diaz-Granados, research associate, Department of Anthropology, Washington University in St. Louis

Wednesday, March 17, 5 pm:

Gallery Talk on Wulfling repoussé plaques with Matthew Robb, assistant curator at the Saint Louis Art Museum

Friday, April 16, 4:30 pm:

Lecture, “Sacred Bundles and the Regalia of Gods, Heroes and Cult-Bearers,” by F. Kent Reilly III, director of the Center for the Arts and Symbolism of Ancient America in the Department of Anthropology at Texas State University, San Marcos