Beautiful Shoes

Moccasin with Twisted Design
Cheyenne Tribe
1958.18.4
Moccasins

Functional, comfortable, and beautiful, the Native American moccasin is a truly useful piece of artwork. This exhibit provides a look at the form, function, and style of this unique piece of clothing.

"Moccasin" was the first word English speakers heard to describe Native American footwear. It was soon used to describe the footwear of all tribes. Many differences existed in the construction of moccasins as well as in their beadwork, quillwork, and color design. Some moccasins had soft soles, some had hard soles, others had fur lining for added warmth. The following pages will examine some of those many differences.

Front-Seam and Side-Seam Moccasins

Front-seam moccasins have soft soles and the leather is folded so the seam runs up the center of the foot. They were typical of the eastern border of the Plains and in the Ohio River Valley.

Front-Seam Moccasin
Ojibwa Tribe
1921.1.29
Side-seam moccasins have soft soles and are made of one piece of leather folded and sewn on the outer side. This style of moccasin was often worn on the Northern Plains.

*Side-Seam Moccasin*
*Flathead Tribe*
*1921.1.34*
Hard Sole versus Soft Sole

On the Plains, Native Americans wore two styles of moccasins, hard sole and soft sole. Hard sole moccasins began to appear in the mid-1800s. They were beneficial on the dry plains where cactus and thorns could pierce soft-soled moccasins.

Originally, rawhide was sewn to the bottom of a soft sole to create a hard sole moccasin. Later, hard sole moccasins were made in two pieces.
Two-piece, hard-soled moccasins were made from a rawhide sole that was sewn to a leather upper. The two pieces were connected from the inside and then turned out. Decoration was done before the two pieces were joined.

The moccasin top on the left in the photograph above would have been sewn to a hard sole with a tongue cut behind the design. Its final shape would have looked like the moccasins on the right.
Parfleche Soles

During the reservation period, old parfleche (rawhide) bags were recycled to make hard soles for moccasins. The sedentary life of the reservation did not require the travel bags that nomadic life did.

*Moccasin with Parfleche Sole*
*Arapaho Tribe*
*1969.166.2*

*Parfleche Bag*
*Flathead Tribe*
*1921.1.186*
Cuffs

Cuffs were often added to moccasins. These cuffs could be turned up and tied around the ankle with a leather thong in bad weather.
Right and Left

Unlike early European shoes that were made exactly alike, most moccasins were specifically made for the right or left foot.

Child's Shoes
1880 - 1890
1959.31.6

Child's Moccasins
Flathead Tribe
1921.1.59
Quillwork Decoration

Quillwork used porcupine quills to create designs on leather. It was used for geometric designs because round shapes were hard to create. Quillwork was generally done by wrapping prepared quills around threads stitched to the piece being decorated.

_Drawings of Two-Thread, One Quill Sewing_
_Drawing Credit: Barbara Hail, Hau, Kola!_
_The Plains Indian Collection of the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology_
_University of Washington Press, 1993_

Quillwork Detail
_Lakota Tribe_
_1977.70.16_
Red Quillwork

Lines of red quillwork tend to be associated with women's moccasins and were largely made by the Dakota Sioux tribes in the late 1800s.

Lines such as these in either quillwork or beadwork were often used to represent trails or paths.

Moccasins with Red Quillwork Design
Lakota Tribe
1977.70.16
Bead Stitching

Lazy Stitch

The easiest way to bead large areas was to use the "Lazy" stitch. In the Central Plains, the Teton Dakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho tribes used this style of beading. Eight to ten beads were strung to form a row that was sewn down at the ends.

Drawing of Lazy Stitch

Drawing Credit: Barbara Hail, Hau, Kola!
The Plains Indian Collection of the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology
University of Washington Press, 1993
Beads Applied with Lazy Stitch

Lakota Tribe

1973.44.59
Spot Stitch

On the northern plains, the Blackfoot, Assiniboin, Gros Ventre, and Plains Cree tribes used a beading style called “Spot” stitch. In this style, beads were threaded and laid in place for straight or curved lines. A second thread secured them with a tiny stitch every one to three beads.

Drawing of Spot Stitch

Drawing Credit:
Barbara Hail, Hau, Kola!
The Plains Indian Collection of the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology
University of Washington Press, 1993
Beads Applied with Spot Stitch
Shoshone Tribe
1966.88.24
Peyote Stitch

In the South, the Comanche and Kiowa tribes used netted stitches called the “Peyote” stitch. The Peyote stitch threads each bead to those at its diagonal corners.

**Drawing of Peyote Stitch**

Drawing Credit:
Barbara Hail, Hau, Kola!
The Plains Indian Collection of the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology
University of Washington Press, 1993
Bead Design Names

Most bead designs have numerous names associated with them. These names represent tribal, European, and individual differences. Some names are based on what the design looked like. Other patterns were named after animal or plant shapes, but were not actually a representation of those things.

The bead designs on the following pages may have additional names not listed in this exhibit.
Cheyenne Design

The Cheyenne tribe often used odd numbers of bead design patterns around the border of their moccasins so that one of the designs always fell on the toe.
Buffalo Tracks Design

This long, curved, dark blue bead design is often referred to as “buffalo tracks” by non-Indians for its resemblance to the mark left by bison hooves. However, Native Americans called this pattern a “space” or “part-between” design.
Twisted Design

Beads in diagonal checker rows, usually in three or more colors, are called “twisted.”
Fully-Beaded Moccasins

In the early 1880s, women of the Teton, Assiniboin, and Cheyenne tribes, began to produce moccasins with fully beaded soles. While some people were buried in them, they were not specifically “burial moccasins.” Fully-beaded moccasins were a status item worn on special occasions by living people.

The winged figure above represents the Thunder Bird. This sacred creature was thought to cause thunder and lightning.
Four Directions

Crosses of various shapes were often used to represent the “Four Directions” which are still sacred to many Native Americans.

Moccasins with Four Directions Design
Arapaho Tribe
1958.18.13
Triangles

Triangle designs represent numerous things such as arrow points, vertebrae, and tipis. Triangles with a rectangle inside them, such as those seen here, represent a tipi and its door.
Shoshone Design

This bead design of a box with inverted triangles on either side was commonly used in rawhide paintings of the Shoshone tribe. It was not unusual for painted designs to be copied into beadwork.
Tripe Design

This bead design of rectangles and squares has been called the “Tripe” design.

Detail of Moccasin with Tripe Design
Arapaho Tribe
1958.18.12

Moccasins with Tripe Design
Arapaho Tribe
1958.18.12
Step Triangle Design

This bead pattern is known as “Step Triangle.” It has also been called the “Mountain,” “Hill,” or “Cut-Out” design.

Detail of Moccasin with Step Triangle Design
Lakota Tribe
1973.44.59

Moccasins with Step Triangle Design
Lakota Tribe
1973.44.59
Feather Design

Two-color, elongated diamond shapes are usually called the "Feather," "Whirlwind," or "Breath of Life" design.
Box Design

Box designs of squares were often meant to represent bags.
Floral Designs

Floral designs are often associated with tribes from the eastern United States. However, floral patterns can be found in most regions. Floral beadwork is usually created using the spot stitch technique. The Shoshone tribe of Wyoming is famous for what is known as the “Shoshone Rose” design.
Problems in Tribal Identification of Moccasins

With so many design differences, why is it difficult to identify moccasins with a specific tribe? Inter-tribal marriage, trade, and outside influences led to a blending of moccasin and beadwork styles. The moccasin below has a Shoshone tribal design, a Cheyenne tribal design, and was said by the donor to be from the Lakota tribe.

Lakota Tribe
1921.1.29
Contemporary Moccasins

Moccasins continue to be made by numerous artisans. While many follow traditional patterns, others incorporate modern or exotic materials creating contemporary works of art. Both styles continue the long-standing Native American tradition of creating beautiful shoes.

Artist: Cleo Goggles
Ethete, Wyoming

Artist: Jody Comes
Pine Ridge, South Dakota
photo: Nebraska State Historical Society
10921-30-(1-2)