

Of This Land:

Native American Woodlands Art at the MFA



Museum of Fine Arts Boston

The MFA stands on the unceded lands of the Massachusett people, who have called this area home since time immemorial. Like many encyclopedic museums, the MFA began collecting Native American art in the late 19th century, but our collection does not include any Massachusett art. Although Massachusett and Wampanoag artists are not yet represented in the MFA's collection, our holdings do include objects made in other parts of the Woodlands, which spans the lands east of the

Mississippi River including the shores of the Great Lakes and Atlantic Ocean.

The works here represent a small but important selection of Woodlands art, mostly made in the 19th century by women whose names are no longer known.

We are working to expand this collection through acquisitions, engagement with Native artists and community members, and interpretation centering Indigenous narratives and voices.



Unidentified artist, sash,
Native American (Eastern
Woodlands, possibly Huron),
early 19th century. Plaited
(finger-woven) wool with
glass beads.

Gift of Timothy Phillips. Museum of Fine
Arts, Boston.



Unidentified artist, powder
horn, Native American
(Penobscot), 1825–50.
Cattle horn, incised
decoration, paint, wood.

Partial gift of James Frank and the
Frank. B. Bemis Fund and Hilsinger
Janson Fund for Native American Art.
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Unidentified artist, quilled pouch, Native American (Mi'kmaq), 1840. Birch bark, dyed porcupine quills, colored silk, white beads.

Partial gift of James Frank and the Frank B. Bemis Fund and Hilsinger Janson Fund for Native American Art. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Unidentified artist, pair of moccasins, Native American (Woodlands), mid-19th century. Wood plain weave, cotton plain weave, cotton velvet, hide or leather, glass beads.

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Unidentified artist, tea caddy,
Native American (Ojibwe),
1844. Birch bark, dyed
porcupine quills.

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Unidentified artist, cigar case,
Native American (Huron),
mid-19th century. Dyed moose
hair, birch bark.

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Boston.



Unidentified artist, side chair with porcupine quillwork panels, Native American (Algonkian, Mi'kmaq), 1860–80. Ebonized mahogany, porcupine quillwork with vegetal dyes on birch bark; porcelain, iron, and brass casters.

Museum purchase with funds by exchange from a Gift of the Estate of Jeannette Calvin Hewett in memory of her husband Roger Sherman Hewett, Bequest of Greenville Howland Norcross, Bequest of George Nixon Black, and Bequest of Mrs. Stephen S. FitzGerald. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Unidentified artist, crooked
knife, Native American
(Woodlands), late 19th-century.
Wood, metal.

Partial gift of James Frank and the Frank B.
Bemis Fund and Hilsinger Janson Fund for
Native American Art. Museum of Fine Arts,
Boston.

Suggestions for Teaching with These Works

Guide students in looking closely and thinking about each of the works of art in the “Of This Land: Native American Woodlands Art” slideshow. Whether for group discussion or writing assignments, it can be useful to use the same questions with multiple works of art, to make evident emerging themes as well as differences across the works. This also creates familiar routines for looking and thinking.

A few general suggestions:

- Begin each discussion with a work of art with at least 30 seconds of quiet looking.
- Over the course of a discussion about an image, take breaks from sharing your screen to return to speaker(s)-only view, and then bring the image back up again.
- Use just 1 or 2 artworks per session during remote meetings and just a few for in-person group discussions too. This slideshow can be used over multiple class sessions or with certain images selected for group discussions and others selected for independent or small group work.

Suggested Guiding Questions

- What is the first thing you noticed?
- What does this work of art seem to tell us about the time and place in which they live(d)?
- What do you bring to your understanding of this work? (for instance: your identity, background knowledge, histories you have learned, interests and/or personal connections)
- What stories are made visible through this work of art? (either that the artist(s) likely intended or that you perceive now)
 - *In many cases it will be helpful to ask a follow-up question: What do you see that makes you say that? (This question developed for Visual Thinking Strategies can be applied in a range of teaching contexts.)*
- What would you want to know more about?

Further Discussion

- The MFA intentionally grouped together these images to highlight art by Woodlands artists and acknowledge the land on which the MFA is physically located. How does looking at these works together in this context impact the way you understand them?
- The MFA is working to expand its collection of Native American art and to address the absence of Massachusetts and Wampanoag works. What advice would you give the MFA as the Museum staff continue to select works of art for the physical and online galleries?
- *While these questions are intended for discussion within your classroom, we certainly would appreciate hearing from your students! E-mail us at teacherresources@mfa.org.*

Teaching with Native American Art

As a complement to the works in this slideshow, which primarily date to the 19th century, recent works by contemporary Native artists from across what is now the United States can offer other important opportunities to combat the historical erasure of Native American peoples—whether through absence, inaccuracy, or stereotype—in so many educational contexts. Engaging with contemporary works of art reinforces the key concept that Native American people are very much present. In highlighting regional artistic practices and also showing a range of artistic traditions, educators can also convey that there is no singular Native American culture but rather hundreds of different tribes, nations, and communities.

For a guide on indigenous terminology as well as a compilation of resources to support teaching about Native American cultures and communities, visit the website of Akomawt Educational Initiative, a frequent partner of the MFA.

**Thank you again for
sharing the MFA with your students!**

Let us help you find art

**Request recommendations of additional works of
art to utilize in teaching.**

**If you have any questions, please contact us at:
teacherresources@mfa.org.**



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