



Frist Art  
Museum

**Hearts of Our People:  
Native Women Artists**  
Teachers Guide

# Contents

On view in Ingram Gallery at the Frist Art Museum  
September 27, 2019–January 12, 2020

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These essays highlight six artworks from Mia's collection featured in "Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists," on view June 2–August 18, 2019, in Target Galleries. Researched and written by Marlena Myles (Spirit Lake Dakota, Mohegan, Muscogee), they are part of a learning resource for K–12 learners, *Native Art, Native Voices*, which also includes video interviews with artists, additional essays, and art lessons developed by Native artists. *Native Art, Native Voices* is available on the Teacher Resources page of Mia's website: [artsmia.org](http://artsmia.org)

In these essays, Myles invites students to learn about artworks from the ancient past to the present by looking closely, exploring techniques, and understanding context. Discussion questions designed by Mia educators accompany each essay. They encourage close looking, critical thinking, and making connections to the lives of individual artists.

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Cover:  
Jamie Okuma (Shoshone-Bannock, Luiseno, Okinawan and Hawaiian), b. 1977; Shoes designed by Christian Louboutin; *Adaptation II* (detail), 2012; Leather, glass beads, porcupine quills, sterling silver cones, brass sequins, chicken feathers, cloth, deer rawhide, buckskin Bequest of Virginia Doneghy, by exchange 2012.68.1a,b

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Hohokam artist  
Bowl, c. 900-1200  
Clay and pigments  
6 $\frac{3}{8}$  × 18 $\frac{3}{4}$  × 18 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (16.19 × 47.63 × 47.63 cm)  
The Director's Discretionary Fund 2004.71

# Bowl, c. 900–1200

Hohokam, which means “Ancient Ones,” refers to an ancient Southwest Native culture that existed from about 1 to 1450 CE. The term comes from their descendants, the O’odham (Oh Oh DOM) people, who live in the lands once inhabited by the Hohokam in the center of present-day Arizona. The Hohokam were sophisticated people known for their massive complex irrigation system, which watered up to 110,000 acres by 1300 CE. This system made possible large-scale agriculture in an otherwise arid environment.

To escape the heat of the sun, the Hohokam lived primarily in naturally cooled pit houses, built partially underground from clay, stone, wood, and straw. When they were not farming, the Hohokam held large community gatherings at ball courts and temple mounds. Because the ball courts drew crowds from great distances to watch the competitions, the courts were often surrounded by markets where the Hohokam would sell their goods, including produce and ceramics of all shapes and sizes.

Believed to be the work mostly, if not exclusively, of women, Hohokam ceramics are primarily made from clay mixed with ground-up stone called temper, which is added to make the clay durable and resistant to cracking while firing. The temper allows present-day archaeologists to source pottery back to specific sites based upon the makeup of its mineral contents. Because pottery from certain regions has been found far from the temper sources, archaeologists now are able to research the complex economy of the Hohokam people and trace their extensive trade routes. The study of Hohokam pottery has helped present-day people better understand this ancient civilization.

## Coloring Ceramics

Diverse groups of ancient people from the southwestern United States created pottery using particular colors of paint and clay, with characteristics unique to the community that made them. To create the paints, they used various native plants, minerals such as pounded hematite, and manganese and limonite stones. The earth gave color to the clay, much of it tinted with iron oxide, yielding yellows to oranges to deep reds. Rare white and gray clays originated deep underground; today, they are sourced from the same secret locations.

This bowl is a form of pottery unique to the Hohokam known as Red-on-Buff. The clay gets its tan coloring from iron oxide. The artists applied the paint, made from ground hematite, freehand with brushes sourced from yucca plants.

Shapes created by the Hohokam artists are also unique to their communities. Their main method for making pottery was paddle and anvil, rather than the coiling method used by most of the Ancient Pueblo people in surrounding regions. Starting with a mass of properly mixed and tempered clay, the potter pressed and shaped it by hand to form the vessel. Then she used a stone or other smooth object on the inside of the vessel as an anvil, and applied pressure with a wooden paddle to the outside to shape the clay.

## Ceramic Designs & Technique

Ceramic painters created complex designs with patterns placed harmoniously to complement the form of each vessel. Hohokam artists were also very practical when deciding where to place designs. They seldom painted the parts of a vessel less likely to be seen or the base that would be worn off through use.

For this bowl, an exterior decoration would have been difficult to see, so the Hohokam artist applied pigment to the inside instead. To create symmetrical designs that balanced the shape of the finished bowl, Hohokam artists would have divided the circular layout of the bowls into thirds, quarters, or halves using boundary and dividing lines. For example, an artist might divide the bowl into even quarters using a cross as a border or, as in this bowl, an offset quartering banding. These bold perpendicular borders organized the design components painted on afterwards. Using simple mathematical devices like mirroring, rotation around a point, and repetition along a line, the artist created a balanced, symmetrical pattern incorporating freehand brushstrokes of smaller motifs. These include hatched borders and echoing waves using counterclockwise interlocked scrolls.

## Basketry

Designs on the earliest Hohokam pottery were inspired by their basket weaving. Today the O'odham, descendants of the Hohokam, create baskets with the same design techniques in mind. With an almost mathematical precision, they weave similarly exuberant works of art that demonstrate a sensitivity for layout, balance, symmetry, and use of negative space. Using locally sourced materials in their art, the O'odham carry on their ancestors' tradition of honoring gifts of the earth.

## Questions

Look closely at the picture of the whole bowl. Where do you see decoration? What parts of the bowl are undecorated? Why do you suppose the artist made these design decisions? Think about how it might feel to hold the bowl (it is about a foot-and-a-half wide at the top). Think about how it would look placed on the ground. What parts would you see?

Look closely at the designs (pictures) painted on the inside a long, long time ago (about 1,000 years ago). What do they remind you of? What might you compare them to in nature?

How has the artist visually divided the design into four parts? In what ways are the designs in each part alike? In what ways do they differ? Think about the artist painting these designs with a brush made from a yucca plant. What "tools" could you make from your natural environment and use to make art?

Compare the designs on the Hohokam bowl with the Pima basket designs. What do they have in common? How are they different?



Akimel O'odham (Pima) artist  
Basket, 19th–20th century  
Natural plant fibers  
3¼ × 16½ in. (8.26 × 41.91 cm)  
The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund  
90.69.4



Ancestral Pueblo artist  
Pot (Olla), c. 1000-1300  
Clay, pigments  
14½ × 18 in. (36.83 × 45.72 cm)  
The Putnam Dana McMillan Fund 90.106

# Pot, c. 1000–1300

Pottery has been one of the most important traditions in Native American societies throughout many generations, especially in the Pueblo region. The ancestral Pueblo people lived over a region that spanned the present-day Four Corners region of the United States, including Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado. Many current-day Pueblo, such as the Acoma, Zuni, and Hopi, are their descendants. The traditions and methods used to create this ancient Puebloan pot, called an olla (oy-yah), are still in use today.

The ancient Pueblo considered the surrounding landscape of mountains, lakes, and mesas sacred. Every Pueblo depended on the rain to nourish their fields, and the people had ceremonies and dances to ensure adequate rainfall.

The term olla refers to a vessel for water, and the design of olla pottery offers an innovative way of protecting this valuable resource. In the arid deserts of the Southwest, potters often shaped these water vessels with narrow necks to prevent evaporation in the dry heat. In an unglazed olla, water seeps through the walls slowly; this process irrigates the roots of a plant without wasteful runoff or evaporation.

## Characteristics of Natural Clay

Traditionally, women have created pottery, though gathering the clay is often a family affair. Because families might have to travel long distances to find their specific sources of clay, which can be heavy, men will frequently join the mothers and daughters to collect clay.

Natural clays vary in color and texture and can be associated with specific sites. The clay generally fires as gray, buff, red, and shades of brown. If clay is found on the earth's surface, it might need to be passed through a sieve to remove debris like sticks and rocks. This olla is created from a rare white clay that is more difficult to work with than other types. It is said that the secret source of this white clay, in the Acoma region in New Mexico, is mined as a hard rock from deep in the earth, then ground into a fine powder for use.

Because it is from the earth, the clay is a sacred gift, and potters make an offering and ask permission before gathering it. It is considered so precious, any scraps of clay that remain from making a pot are saved and reused in the next pot.

## Process: From Clay to Pottery

Potters often begin their pots with a flat slab of clay. If it is a large pot, a mold might be used to help support it. Using a hand-built coiling method, the potter stacks coils of moist clay around the rim of the base, making sure to knead out any air bubbles that could ruin the pot once it is fired. As the pot grows, the potter uses a scraping tool made from a potsherd or gourd rind to shape its form and thin the walls. The process can take several days or even weeks depending on the size and complexity of the shape. When the form of the pot is finished, the potter lets it dry before sanding it using corn cobs, lava rocks, or sandstone. Pueblo families often pass down such objects used in making pottery.

Traditionally, Pueblo potters have desired a smooth exterior on which to paint their designs. The final shape of a pot heavily influences the design added later. Present-day potters maintain that it is impossible to force the clay to behave in ways it does not want to; the same goes for the freehand design painted on the surface. Pigments for pot designs vary; they include plant materials, rocks containing metallic-oxide, and other colors of clay that is ground to a fine powder, then mixed with water.

Firing techniques vary with every group, but precision is required in temperature and the choice of kindling used, as different combinations will affect the pottery in the kiln. Potters use wood from various types of trees or dried animal dung. Sometimes a potter will travel many miles to collect kindling. Compared to most European firing of earthenware, Pueblo pottery fires for a very short time, ranging from 45 minutes to a few hours.

## Pueblo Design & Meaning

The geometric design on this pot reveals a refined sense of order and balance. Rain and agriculture were important facets of ancient Puebloan life. Upon this pot created from earth and fire, the potter painted a freehand design that shows the interconnectedness of water and life: the square and dot design evokes rows of maize (like corn) kernels; and the interlocked lines of small white squares with a dot in the middle represent a traditional three-step cloud motif and also refer to lightning, which heralds the summer rainstorms.

Clay is the only material on earth that, when properly fired, lasts forever. This longevity has allowed clay to be repurposed by the descendants of the ancient Pueblo. One Acoma artist, Lucy Lewis, was often inspired by the black-on-white line drawings she saw on the shards of pottery created by her ancestors. She did not speak English, though records show that ancient Pueblo pots were among her earlier influences. Acoma potters will sometimes add ground shards from ancient pots to their clay, believing they are adding something of their ancestors to the new pots.



Lucy Martin Lewis (Acoma, 1898-1992)  
Jar, 1968  
Ceramic, pigment  
The Patricia and Peter Frechette Endowment  
for Art Acquisition and Gift of Funds from  
Constance Kunin 2018.5

## Summary

For thousands of years, women have made pottery using three basic elements: earth, water, and fire. Working in harmony with the earth is a tradition that continues today, with women carrying on the traditions of their ancestors—choosing to excavate the clay in the same ceremonial manner, making the pots, and firing them using age-old practices in preference to modern methods.

## Questions

Look closely at this pot, called an olla. Describe the pot.

How has the potter made this pot appear balanced? How is the shape balanced? How has the artist also made the pot seem dynamic? What words would you use to describe the designs on the surface?

Look for designs that show how life is connected to water. The small white squares with dots in the middle recall rows of maize (like corn) kernels. The lines they form represent a three-step design that refers to clouds and lightning. Why might artists want to include designs about water on vessels like this one? What designs would you use today as symbols of the importance of water to life?

Pueblo artists today frequently look to vessels like this one from 1,000 years ago for inspiration. Why do you think they might do this? What from the past inspires you today? Some artists still include parts of ancient vessels in their contemporary pots. Why do you suppose they might do this?

Compare Lucy Martin Lewis's pot with this olla. What do they have in common? How do they differ?

Working in clay keeps artists connected to and in harmony with the earth. What creative processes do you use today to stay connected to the earth? Many vessels were made to store water for families and communities. What do you do today to help conserve water?





Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) or Dakhóta artists  
Dance Blanket, c. 1840–50  
Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) or Dakhóta artists  
Wool, silk, beads; needlework  
53 × 62 × 7/8 inch (134.622 × 157.48 × 2.22 cm)  
The Robert J. Ulrich Works of Art Purchase Fund 2007.1

# Dance Blanket, c. 1840–50

This dance blanket was created by and passed down through the descendants of Iháŋkthuŋwaŋna (Yanktonai) Dakhóta leader Wakíŋyaŋdúta (Red Thunder) and the prominent Dickson and LaFramboise fur trader families of early Minnesota history. All materials used in its creation came through the fur trade industry. Family lore states that this blanket was made in 1845 in celebration of the first owners' marriage. Both Jane Dickson (b. 1820) and fur trader Joseph LaFramboise (b. 1805) were of mixed European and Native American heritages, which was commonplace for families involved in the fur trade.

## Historical Context

A steady source of income, the fur trade provided much political power to many Native American tribes involved in it. Jane Dickson's mother was of Anishinaabe-European descent, and her Dakhóta-European father was William Dickson, the grandson of Wakíŋyaŋdúta. Her grandfather Robert Dickson was a fur trader who fought in the War of 1812 in an attempt to establish Minnesota as a British colony. She lived among her Dakhóta family in South Dakota, where she met her husband, Joseph LaFramboise, who also came from generations of fur traders. He was a descendant of Kewinoquot, leader of the Ottawa tribe, and his mother was one of the most successful traders in history, Madeline LaFramboise.

Prior to the arrival of Europeans, Dakhóta villages consisted of many large extended families (thiyóšpaye). Rules of kinship bonds regulated the economy, production, and trade of goods. The thiyóšpaye refused to trade only for economic reasons, illuminating how personal relationships were pivotal for the success of the fur trade. For European-Americans to trade with the Dakhóta, they had to create social bonds. The most successful traders married into the Dakhóta kinship society, which also raised the status of the family of the Dakhóta woman through access to European goods. Similar kinship-marriage relationships were established between various tribes and European traders in the Great Lakes and Plains regions; women served as cultural liaisons between European and Indigenous traders. For many decades, the fur trade peacefully

contributed to many economies and created new ethnic groups consisting of mixed-heritage people.

## Dakhóta Beadwork

Created at the end of the fur trade era, this rare blanket combines ribbonwork with beadwork, two very important and innovative decorative forms to Native Americans. Dakhóta designs frequently featured floral motifs, and it is possible that the designs in this blanket represent stylized Native plant species used for cooking or as medicine. It is not known if Jane Dickson created the beadwork herself, but based on the style, it was likely made by a Dakhóta woman. The ribbon appliqué work is unattributed to a tribe, as many in the region were capable of doing such fine work. It is possible more than one woman worked on the blanket.

Indeed, much of the fur trade was women's work. While Dakhóta men would hunt for the furs, it was the women who cleaned and prepared the hides for trade. Only properly tanned hides had value, and that value was enhanced by the quillwork or beadwork added by women.

By the time this blanket was made, beads had become an integral part of Plains art. Prior to the acquisition of beads, brought by European traders, women embroidered plant-dyed porcupine quills on bison hides using bone awls. Quillwork was thought to add special powers linked to the symbols or colors incorporated in the design. Beadwork was an innovative method for Native artists who adapted the European-made materials to their traditions. When the fur trade expanded to the Plains, the introduction of cloth, thread, and glass beads hastened the decline in use of earlier bone tools, replaced by metal awls and needles more suitable to beadwork.

## Dakhóta Ribbonwork

After the French Revolution in 1789, ribbons became unfashionable in Europe and were exported to North America for use in the fur trade. Woodlands and Plains artists quickly adapted the silk and satin ribbons to

create a form of appliqué decoration using traditional designs not seen before in Europe. With the ribbons, women created geometric patterns in a reverse-appliqué technique of sewing cut-out ribbon patterns onto a background of a contrasting color ribbon. The more complex the design, the more desirable and valued the object was to own and wear.

## Summary

This blanket embodies the history of generations of both Indigenous and European fur traders. Many tribes today continue to use similar beadwork and ribbon appliqué to create dancing regalia for powwows. This dance blanket represents the powerful roles of women in the economy of their tribe as both artists and providers for their people. A representation of the blending of Minnesota history, cultures, and ways of life, it is a symbol of the beauty that can come from the meeting of people.

## Questions

What part of this dance blanket did you notice first? What about that part drew your attention?

Describe the blanket. Describe the designs. Which designs are organic? Which are geometric? What images do you recognize? What images do you wonder about? Why might these types of designs appeal to the Dakhóta? What kinds of things do you use plants for today? What kinds of things in your environment (outside and inside) inspire you?

Look at details of the designs. What materials do the artists use to make them? What do you see that makes you say that? Artists valued the materials for their unique qualities. Today, what might you value most about the glass beads? The silk ribbons?

Think about stitching all of these beads and sewing all of these ribbons to the wool blanket, which measures about 4½ by 5 feet. What activities are important to you even though they are time-consuming and require a lot of patience?



Māhpíya Boǵá wiŋ (Nellie Two Bear Gates)  
(Yanktonia Lakḥóta, Standing Rock Reservation, born 1854)  
Suitcase, 1880–1910  
Beads, hide, metal, oilcloth, thread  
12½ × 17¼ × 10¼ in. (31.75 × 44.93 × 26.04 cm) (closed)  
The Robert J. Ulrich Works of Art Purchase Fund 2010.19



# Suitcase, 1880–1910

## Artist's Background

Maḥpíya Boḡá wiḡ (Gathering of Stormclouds Woman), later known as Nellie Two Bear Gates, was an Iháŋkthūwaŋna (Yanktonai) Dakhóta artist from the Standing Rock Reservation in South Dakota. Born in 1854, she was the daughter of Iháŋkthūwaŋna parents Huŋká Káḡe Wiḡ (Makes Relatives Woman) and tribal leader Maḥó Núnpa (Two Bears).

At age 7, Maḥpíya Boḡá wiḡ (Mah PEE ya Bo HAH ween) was sent to a boarding school in Missouri, where her Native language and culture were supplanted by English and Christian teachings. While at boarding school, she excelled at many topics and learned French and English. When she was 17, her father passed away, and she returned home. At first, she was reluctant to return, but soon she became accustomed to her traditional ways of life. Upon her return home, she never spoke English or French again, even to her descendants, for whom English was a first language.

Despite the negative aspects of boarding schools, many students stubbornly held onto their tribal identities. Studies have shown that many students went back to their reservations and became leaders in tribal politics. That includes Maḥpíya Boḡá wiḡ's daughter, Josephine Gates, who was the first Native woman from Standing Rock to graduate from the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania and later, in 1946, to become the first female elected leader of a modern tribal nation. Continuing the generations of strong leadership abilities, Susan Kelly Power, daughter of Josephine and granddaughter of Maḥpíya Boḡá wiḡ, established the first urban Native American center (in Chicago).

## Historical Context

In the absence of a written language, art held an important place in the tribe's oral traditions. Maḥpíya Boḡá wiḡ was perhaps the first woman of her tribe to break the gender barrier and create artwork using figurative images. Historically, men created figurative drawings on tipi covers and clothing that illustrated the war accomplishments of both individuals and the tribe.

Maḥpíya Boḡá wiḡ used the same style of figures and incorporated the women's traditional art form of abstract geometric designs along the borders of this suitcase.

Prior to the acquisition of beads, ribbons, and other materials from Europe, women used organic pigments to paint geometric abstract artwork on animal hide bags, known as wókphaŋ (commonly referred to as parfleche bags in English). For nomadic people, these bags held all their possessions as they followed the movement of the bison, the most important animal to Plains tribes' ways of life. The early geometric forms on wókphaŋ inspired later forms of artwork, including quillwork and beadwork.

Maḥpíya Boḡá wiḡ began beading at an early age; she had such talent, her nickname as a child was Little Thimble. On this suitcase, she applied beads to deer or bison hide using a style called lane stitch, which then was applied to a commercially produced suitcase. She created her scenes using a traditional Plains art style, in which humans and animals are drawn with flat color and without shading, shadows, or background.

## Description of Scenes

Maḥpíya Boḡá wiḡ used her beadwork to illustrate the changing times and adaptation of her people while maintaining ties to their traditional ways of life. This beaded suitcase was created between 1880 and 1909, a time of dramatic change as her people were confined to the Standing Rock Reservation. The Dakhóta could no longer hunt bison, which historically provided almost everything the people needed to thrive: food, clothing, housing, tools.

## Side One: Marriage Scene

One side features a traditional marriage scene in two parts. Because of the inscription of Ida Claymore's name on the suitcase, it is believed Maḥpíya Boḡá wiḡ created this suitcase for her friend, a prominent member of Standing Rock society, in honor of her marriage. Both women owned cattle ranches; Claymore's descendants still own a large ranch on the Standing Rock Reservation.

The scene shows the bride and her parents amid the feast celebration, displaying all the gifts they received. Along the top-left corner, 11 horses surround two figures, possibly Claymore's parents, who flank a row of kettles; as a common marriage proposal, a suitor would offer horses to the woman's parents to show his value and worth as a potential husband and provider. At the bottom is the bride next to her tipi surrounded by her new gifts: (left to right) beaded pipe bags; two full, beaded bison robes; a trade cloth with beaded bison strip; and a robe with an animal figure.

## Side Two: Roping Cattle

The scene with the cowboys roping cattle illustrates how her family adapted and continued their traditions of bison hunting after the populations of bison dwindled to a few hundred. Maḥpiya Boḡá wiṅ's husband, Frank Gates, participated in the last bison hunt on the Standing Rock Reservation, which took place in September, 1883. Because people of her tribe were familiar with raising horses and hunting, they adapted to cattle ranching relatively easily compared to farming. The U.S. government supplied cattle and encouraged ranching on the Standing Rock Reservation. The traditional communal bison hunt was called Wanáuṅsapi in Dakhóta, the same word for the rations of beef promised by the government. The Dakhóta applied the methods of hunting bison to cattle, demanding it be issued to them "on the hoof" so that they could hunt and make use of the entire animal just as they had with bison.

## Importance of the Artwork

The artist captures the history of her people prior to European arrival in the wedding scene, as well as the changing times in which she lived in the ranching scene. Though to outsiders cattle may seem to intrude upon Dakhóta traditions, ranching allowed their methods and techniques of harvesting bison to survive. The Standing Rock Reservation currently has four community-owned bison herds and hosts small hunts during which children are able to reclaim the traditional methods.

Little thorough documentation of Maḥpiya Boḡá wiṅ's work exists, and only a handful of her artworks are explicitly catalogued. She made most of them as gifts for her family and friends. Indeed, only a few beaded

suitcases remain, and this suitcase is considered to be one of the finest. A perfect illustration of resiliency and creativity, this suitcase beautifully blends tradition and innovation.

## Questions

Each side of the suitcase features a different theme. One side shows scenes of cattle ranching on Standing Rock Reservation. What do you see? What appears to be going on? What do you see that makes you say that? What do you wonder about when you look at this ranching scene?

The other side shows two scenes from a traditional marriage, one of the bride with gifts, and the other of her parents. Describe the two different scenes. What do you see? What do you wonder about these scenes?

The artist created artworks that include elements of traditional and contemporary life. Think about some things in your life that rely on both traditional and newer ideas. Where in your surroundings do you see traditional designs used on contemporary objects?

Compare and contrast this suitcase with the tipi cover. What do they have in common? How do they differ? Consider images, materials, and artistic purpose.

If you were to decorate a suitcase or backpack with images that told stories about your life and identity, what would you include?



Jamie Okuma (Shoshone-Bannock, Luiseno, Okinawan and Hawaiian),  
b. 1977

Shoes designed by Christian Louboutin  
*Adaptation II*, 2012

Leather, glass beads, porcupine quills, sterling silver cones, brass  
sequins, chicken feathers, cloth, deer rawhide, buckskin  
8 $\frac{5}{8}$  × 9 $\frac{3}{16}$  × 3 $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (21.91 × 23.34 × 8.26 cm) (each)  
Bequest of Virginia Doneghy, by exchange 2012.68.1a,b



# Adaptation II, 2012

## Artist's Background

Jamie Okuma's heritage is Shoshone-Bannock, Luiseno, Okinawan, and Hawaiian. She was born in Southern California, raised on the Shoshone-Bannock Reservation in Fort Hall, Idaho, and lives on the La Jolla reservation in Pauma Valley, California. In 2000, at age 22, she became the youngest "Best in Show" winner of the Santa Fe Indian Art Market. She went on to win "Best of Show" twice more for her mixed-media miniature beaded and quilled dolls.

Okuma began working with beads as a child, creating her own powwow regalia under the tutelage of her mother and grandmother. She continued learning beadwork and, in high school, created her first of many beaded miniature dolls. Okuma considers her miniature dolls "soft-sculptures." Each doll meticulously captures authentic, accurate traditional Native fashion using the finest materials.

After 15 years of creating miniature dolls, Okuma opened her own fashion label and began making high-end articles of clothing using beadwork and quillwork. She considers her fashion a self-portrait, reflective of her exquisite taste. Since her youth, she has been attracted to the finest quality materials, from the pre-World War II antique beads she chooses to brain-tanned buckskin and Italian leather. Responding to the fact that many Native Americans live in the modern world while honoring the past, she combines her Native heritage with contemporary fashion tastes.

## Historical Background

In historical Native American societies, women typically created the clothing for the tribe. Important and influential tribal members sought to commission those women who were exceptional in a specialized skill, such as quillwork. Elegant clothes help define a distinguished person; even today, ceremonial clothes are made by women with specialized skills. Native fashion designers continue the tradition of fine craftsmanship to express their personal, social, and cultural experiences.

Historically among Plains tribes, tools were an important symbol of a person's ability to carry out

critical roles in the tribe's survival. When a girl reached puberty, she received a set of bone tools for preparing hides. These tools, especially her awl, were symbols of her accomplishments. They helped her create clothing and housing for her family, representing the woman's creative power and industriousness.

Today, this symbolism of women's tools persists in the regalia of women at powwows. For example, many women wear an awl case to show their industriousness, a strike-a-light bag to show their hospitality, and a knife case to show their generosity.

## Creative Process

In 2012, Okuma began beading a pair of \$900 Christian Louboutin shoes, starting with its signature red-soled heel. She looked at the shape of each shoe to decide the designs that would flow with the curves, just like Southwestern Native potters look at the shapes of their clay vessels to decide what designs will harmonize with those forms.

Shoes became her art medium. Okuma invented her own techniques for beading shoes. Like Native women in the past who adapted their techniques to new materials, she created her own curved needles to bead onto the curved surfaces. Another innovation was to coat her sewing fingers with liquid latex and setting powder to better grip her needles.

She begins each design as patterns on paper and then traces them onto brain-tanned buckskin, the gold standard in Native materials, which comes from her grandmother's reservation, Fort Hall. Then she sews on antique Venetian beads, some as small as a grain of salt. For *Adaptation II*, Okuma used size 15 and 13 beads, sewn three or four beads at a time onto the buckskin. She lined the ankle tongue with antique brass sequins, dyed porcupine quills, and dyed chicken feathers within sterling silver cones. The abstract designs are reminiscent of those she learned as a child creating her powwow regalia.

Sometimes, Okuma will spend up to a year beading a pair of designer shoes. Though they are meant to be worn, because of their rarity, exemplary workmanship,

and unique beauty, many are instead collected. Designers like Okuma represent an authentic Native American voice—not someone else’s idea of what Native art and fashion should be. International fashion houses tend to have many people involved to create handmade items to a designer’s specifications; however, with Native American fashion designers like Okuma, the work can only be done by the artist, who is guided by sacred symbols and visions unique to their Indigenous heritage.

## Summary

It is a widely held belief that Native fashion is static and unchanging; yet, Native women have always embraced new ideas, techniques, and materials, incorporating them into existing Indigenous aesthetic forms. Okuma, like Native women artists of the past, continues this tradition of innovation by displaying creativity in her meticulously beaded dolls and high-end fashion, while also honoring and respecting traditional cultural values in response to changing times and conditions of Native people.

## Questions

What do you notice first about these shoes? What drew your attention to that part first? As a class, explore the different parts of the shoes. What words describe the heels? What designs or patterns do you see there? What words describe the designs on the platforms? The tongue flaps? The sides?

To make these special shoes, Jamie Okuma uses traditional Native techniques she learned as a young girl when she first made her own powwow regalia. What materials do you see? (Dyed porcupine quills, dyed feathers, silver cones, sequins, beads.) What, if anything, in your own life do these materials remind you of?

In the process of transforming the shoes, Okuma had to invent new tools and strategies (i.e., curved needle, coating her fingers with liquid latex and setting powder). Think of a time when you had to innovate to do something that was important to you? What was your innovation? How did it help you accomplish your goals?

Okuma intentionally purchased these designer shoes to remake or adapt them using Native techniques and materials. What kinds of projects have you done that required you to transform something into something totally new?



Dyani White Hawk (Sičhánǵu Lakǵóta [Brulé]), b. 1976  
*Untitled (Quiet Strength I)*, 2016  
Acrylic on canvas  
42 × 42 × 2¼ in. (106.68 × 106.68 × 5.72 cm)  
Gift of funds from Nivin MacMillan 2016.74

# Untitled (Quiet Strength I), 2016

## Artist's Background

Dyani White Hawk is of Sičhánŋu Lakḥóta, German, and Welsh ancestry. She is a contemporary award-winning artist who lives in Minnesota. During the 2011 Santa Fe Indian Art Market, White Hawk won "Best of Classification"; in 2012 and 2013, she won "Best of Division" and first-place prizes. She graduated from Haskell Indian Nations University in 2003. In 2008, she earned a BFA in two-dimensional studio arts from the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA). In 2011, she graduated from University of Wisconsin-Madison with an MFA in Studio Arts.

White Hawk's mother, who is from the Rosebud Indian Reservation, was adopted by non-Native parents. Growing up in Madison, Wisconsin, White Hawk said she did not connect with her Lakḥóta ancestry until her teenage years:

As a woman of Lakota and European ancestry, my life experiences have been a combination of both Western and indigenous educations, causing a continual negotiation of value systems and worldviews. Through the amalgamation of abstract symbols and motifs derivative of both Lakota and Western abstraction, my artwork examines, dissects, and patches back together pieces of each in a means to provide an honest representation of self and culture. (*Cowboy and Indians* magazine, January 2016 issue)

Her work combines her two loves: modern abstract painting and traditional Lakḥóta arts. As she studied her favorite non-Native modern artists, she discovered an underlying familiarity and connection within their work. Art movements such as Modernism and its associated artists, including Mark Rothko and Marsden Hartley, drew influences from Native American arts.

White Hawk reconciles her life experiences to create her modern abstract artwork. Her Lakḥóta heritage is organically and visually reflected in her work through her use of Indigenous materials and techniques, such as quillwork and beadwork. In other artworks, as in *Untitled (Quiet Strength I)*, she paints abstractions that reference these techniques.

## Quillwork

Porcupine quillwork is one of the oldest forms of Native American art. Prior to the introduction of glass beads, quillwork was a popular art form among North American tribes of the Plains and Woodlands regions. Compared to beadwork of later years, quillwork is considered more sacred because quills come from the porcupine, a living being. To collect the loose quills, women throw a blanket over the porcupine. They then boil the quills to soften them. Traditionally, women dyed the quills with plant pigments; today, synthetic pigments may be used instead. Later, the women dry and rub the quills with animal oils to prevent them from becoming brittle.

Quilling has sacred significance for the Lakḥóta people. Dreaming is a noble way to gain sacred knowledge, and the art of quillwork came to the Lakḥóta through dreams. In a religious sense, quillwork represents the virtues for which all Lakḥóta women should aspire, including generosity, persistence, and industriousness. In almost all Plains and Woodlands tribes, a woman's creativity was highly valued; for many tribes of the region, women had their own societies where they taught certain skills. In quillwork societies, the number of hides dressed and decorated contributed to a woman's social status, and a record was kept for each woman's achievements. Sometimes a special belt was given to show how industrious a woman was; it was an honor to wear one, as it could not be obtained otherwise. A woman's creative accomplishments were celebrated just as man's war accomplishments were celebrated.

Lakḥóta women worked together to pass along knowledge to the younger generations. For White Hawk, passing along knowledge is also very important. In 2017, she was awarded the NACF Mentor Artist Fellowship, reflecting her commitment to share her knowledge of both her traditional and contemporary artistic techniques and art practice with an apprentice. By teaching beadwork and quillwork to her apprentice, White Hawk continues this tradition of Native women.

## **The Painting, *Untitled (Quiet Strength I)***

Dyani White Hawk strongly desires to expose new audiences to Native history through her art. In *Untitled (Quiet Strength I)*, White Hawk uses thousands of vertical lines to refer subtly to traditional quillwork. This required weeks of meticulous, repetitive brushwork. Traditionally, Lakḥóta women told complex stories through their abstract geometric art, and White Hawk continues this tradition by transforming complex ideas into visual statements made as graceful and poignant as possible.

### **Summary**

Dyani White Hawk hopes Native viewers will see their own personal stories reflected in her painting, *Untitled (Quiet Strength I)*. As a platform for conversation, she draws the viewer into seeing the intersectionality of Native and non-Native cultures: each line represents the respect and value she sees in the traditional skills of her ancestors. Yet, as a contemporary artwork, it also highlights the need to reflect on how Native history is taught. She believes that at the heart of contemporary art is the practice of engaging in difficult conversations, and that the greatest growth and gains come from understanding one another's stories.

## **Questions**

Look closely at this painting. Describe what you see. What, if anything, does it remind you of? What about it reminds you of that?

At first glance, what about this painting seems abstract? What about it appears naturalistic? What did White Hawk do to make the image appear realistic? Sometimes artists paint to create the illusion of real texture. What do you think the texture here would feel like? How might the actual surface of the painted canvas feel?

Compare this painting to the quillwork designs on Jamie Okuma's shoes. What do they have in common? How do they differ?