



a life in **BEADS**

The Stories a Plains Dress Can Tell



NATIONAL
MUSEUM
OF THE
AMERICAN
INDIAN

EDUCATION OFFICE

A Life in Beads: The Stories a Plains Dress Can Tell



GRADE LEVELS: 4–6 | TIME REQUIRED: 4 CLASS PERIODS

Overview

In this poster, students will be introduced to three generations of Assiniboine (pronounced Uh-SINNA-boyn)/Sioux (pronounced SUE) women who make traditional dresses. Through their stories and their art, students will learn about the importance of preserving Native culture and see how families share and pass down traditions. Students will gain an understanding of the ongoing Plains traditions of beadwork and quillwork—decorative arts done with beads and porcupine quills—and the “giveaway” (an honoring celebration). Students will explore the significance of designs and symbols found on dresses and better understand the Plains peoples’ long-standing, close connection to their surroundings and natural resources.

Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

Culture: Performance Expectations A, C

People, Places, & Environments: Performance Expectations B, H

Objectives

In the lessons and activities, students will be able to:

- Identify the historic Assiniboine and Sioux territories and present-day location of the Assiniboine/Sioux
- Name three Assiniboine/Sioux traditions and gain an understanding of their cultural significance
- Identify some of the resources used to make traditional dresses and where those resources are found
- Understand the meaning behind some symbols found on American Indian dresses

Background

Native women have always had an important role in preserving cultural traditions and values. The elaborately beaded dresses that Plains women made—and still make and wear—are both beautiful garments and outward expressions of their tribal identity and family values. Historically, dresses were the canvases upon which Plains women expressed their creativity, marked significant events (such as marriage or a family member’s military service), and displayed family pride.

Images found on early painted muslin dresses were often meant to honor an individual’s accomplishments in battle, to acknowl-

edge a male family member’s valor, or to recognize a sacrifice. In most cases, men painted the battle scenes on dresses. A dress with these images would only be worn by a family member: a wife, mother, sister, daughter, or granddaughter.

The Assiniboine and Sioux are two separate tribes from the Northern Plains region, both situated on the Fort Peck Reservation in northeastern Montana. They are just two nations out of more than 550 Native nations in the United States today who still adorn their clothing, accessories, and other implements with materials that reflect their surroundings and relate their beliefs and values. Each Native nation expresses itself in its own unique way—using different colors, symbols, designs, and materials. The Sioux are made up of three distinct but related groups that are separated by language dialects: the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota—and those groups are further divided into several bands. The Fort Peck Sioux include the Sisseton/Wahpeton, Yanktonai, Cuthead, Oglala, and Hunkpapa bands. The Fort Peck Assiniboine are from the Canoe Paddler and Red Bottom bands. This poster features the perspectives and values of three generations of women who are Assiniboine/Sioux, giving students an opportunity to explore some important Plains traditions that have been carried on for many generations.

🕒 **Note to teachers:** The instructional content of the poster is designed to be photocopied, but you can also download full-size pdfs of the maps on the web at: www.nmai.edu/education.

Procedures

🕒 **Display the poster in the classroom.** Explain to students that they will be learning about some of the cultural traditions of the Assiniboine/Sioux. (Review and practice pronunciation of “Assiniboine/Sioux.”) Explain that they are actually two separate tribes from the Northern Plains area.

🕒 **Provide a brief introduction to Plains states and tribes.** To view a map and a list of Plains tribes go to: www.bbhc.org/collections/pim and click on “Map of cultural regions and tribes.” Download the pdf file (Figure 2) of the map of Montana, featuring Fort Peck. Point out the historic territories that the Assiniboine and Sioux inhabited and the location of the Fort Peck Reservation, present-day home to the Assiniboine/Sioux. For historic background on these two nations, a timeline of

events, and how they both came to reside on the Fort Peck Reservation, go to: www.usd.edu/~iaais/siouxnation/FtPeck/tribhist.html or www.montana.edu/wwwfpcc/tribes/Short.html.

🕒 **Next, have the class examine the poster front**, think about the images, and talk about what the images tell them about the Assiniboine/Sioux. Have them compare the styles of dress in the images and talk about the differences. Ask them to look closely and try to identify the materials on the dresses, what they are made of, and the occasions on which they might have been worn. Prompt thinking with questions, e.g., What does it look like the dresses are made of? Where do you think they got the material? Who do you suppose made the dresses? (Questions are designed to establish students' ideas, perceptions, and starting knowledge of Plains Indians and clothing.)

🕒 **Write the word TRADITION on the board.** Ask students to define it in their own words. Select a student to look up the word in the dictionary, read the definition, and write it on the board. Engage the class in a discussion of how traditions get started and why they are important. Ask students to think of their own family traditions and share answers.

Resources and Materials

🕒 **Print out Reproducibles 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3.** With the class, read the passages, focusing attention on maps, images, and captions. On the board, write the following questions and have students provide answers on their own papers. Review answers with class.

A. Resources and Materials Review Questions

1. How did men and boys contribute to the making of dresses?
2. How do men show their respect for the animals they kill on a hunt?
3. How did women contribute to the making of dresses?

B. Decoration and Adornment Review Questions

1. What were the first paints made out of? What were the first paintbrushes made out of?
2. Besides paints, what were some of the first materials used to decorate Plains clothing?
3. Why is quillwork more difficult than beading?

4. Explain why Native people of the Plains still use natural materials to make dresses today.

🕒 **Map Activity:** Print out and distribute the elk and porcupine maps (Figures 1 & 3). Point out Montana in the elk map. Select students to read aloud the information contained within the maps, including the keys. Ask the following questions of the class and select students for answers.

1. Refer to Figure 2 and find where the Assiniboine and Sioux are located today. According to Figure 1, when would the Assiniboine have found elk more plentiful?
2. Name one state where you would not hunt elk in 1850.
3. What does the map tell you about the elk population today versus 1850?
4. What are the two main materials needed to make an elk tooth dress? According to the map, would these materials be easy to find in Assiniboine or Sioux territories in 1850?
5. If you were to make a quilled elkhide dress, what two main materials would be needed? In 1850, who might have an easier time finding quills, the Assiniboine or Sioux? Why?
6. What materials are your clothes made of? Where do the materials come from?

🕒 **Plains Dresses: Print out Reproducibles 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3** and distribute to the class. Read the text aloud and pause to refer to the pictures, also reading the captions.

🕒 **Plains Dresses: "Layers of Meaning" Review Questions.**

1. How are Plains dresses different from your special occasion clothes?
2. What material might be used to decorate a Plains wedding dress? How are Plains wedding dresses different from the ones you are familiar with?
3. What are the three main Plains traditions discussed in the passages? (ANSWER: beading, dressmaking, and the giveaway celebration)
4. What is a giveaway and why do Native people have them? Why do they give away horses?
5. What/who did the "Give Away Horses" dress honor?
6. Based on the reading, how are Plains traditions often passed down? Why is it important for Plains traditions to be passed down?



🕒 Discuss with the class the importance of symbols and how they communicate values. Use the Give Away Horses dress as an example of symbols that represent the values of family and traditions.

🕒 Have students draw their own dresses and shirts using their own designs and symbols. The idea is not to create an “Indian garment,” but shirts and dresses decorated with symbols that have special meaning according to their own values and culture. Students should be creative in coming up with their own symbols to represent family, animals, or other things that hold great value for them. The symbols they choose might depict respect, love, and honor. Dresses can be in honor of a parent or grandparent. Assist students in thinking about possible symbols, such as roses, stars, hearts, and others, and about the meanings attached to them. Have students write an explanation of what their dress or shirt means to them and display their work in class. To explore more about symbols and how an unrelated culture—Chinese culture—used symbols on clothing, see: www.phm.gov.au/hsc/evrev/chinese_dress.htm.

Resources

To see and learn more about Plains dresses and objects featured in the National Museum of the American Indian exhibit, *Identity by Design: Tradition, Change, and Celebration in Native Women’s Dresses*, go to: www.nmai.si.edu and click on “Exhibitions.”

For further information on other decorative material used on Plains dresses and the introduction of glass beads on the Plains, go to: www.bbhc.org/pim/faq.cfm.

To learn more about elk, their habitat, and elk conservation efforts, visit: www.rmef.org.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Joyce, Juanita, and Jessica Growing Thunder Fogarty (Assiniboine/Sioux); Emil Her Many Horses (Oglala Lakota), NMAI; and Kakwireiosta Hall (Mohawk/Cherokee)

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Sioux dress with dentalium shell yoke, ca. 1900. Detail to right. Photos by Ernest Amoroso, NMAI.



All images on poster National Museum of the American Indian, except as noted.

Poster Front Photo Credits

Main image:

Sioux two-hide dress with fully beaded yoke, ca. 1865.

Photo by Ernest Amoroso, NMAI.

Image retouching by Angelia Collins, NMAI.

Insets, left to right:

Arapaho woman wearing cloth dress decorated with elk teeth (detail), 1898. Photo by Frank A. Rinehart or Adolph F. Muhr.

Hunkpapa Lakota (Sioux) cloth dress (detail), ca. 1890. Photo by Ernest Amoroso, NMAI.

Sioux girl in beaded dress, ca. 1890. Photographer unknown.

Sioux dress with dentalium shell yoke (detail), ca. 1900. Photo by Ernest Amoroso, NMAI.

Oglala Sioux woman wearing cloth dress decorated with elk teeth, ca. 1890. Photo by William Henry Jackson.

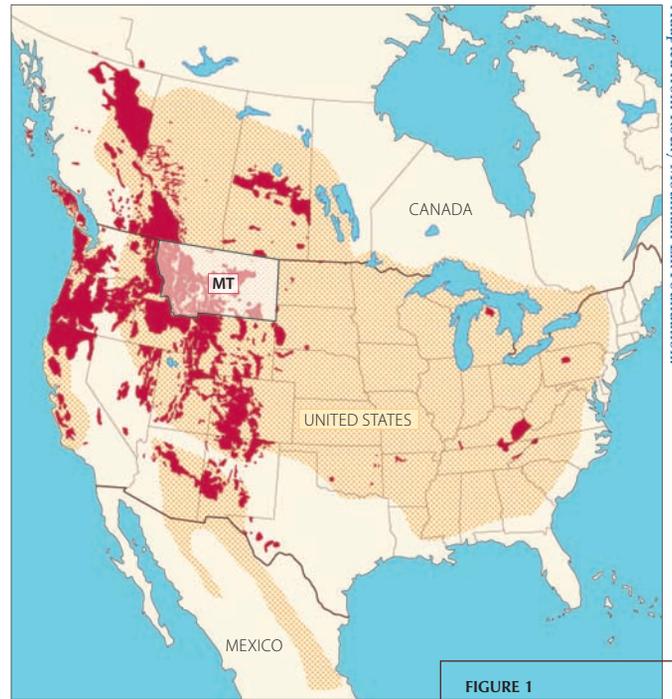


Resources and Materials Used to Make Dresses

In the late 1600s, before modern-day borders were established, the Assiniboine migrated south to Montana from Canada. The Sioux gradually moved to the areas now known as Montana and the Dakotas from Canada and Minnesota beginning around the mid 1800s. The Assiniboine and Sioux found the area teeming with wildlife, including buffalo, elk, deer, antelope, and mountain sheep. These animals were important for their meat and for the hides that provided clothing and shelter.

Native people used what was available in their surroundings. In the Northern Plains area, the hides most often used for clothing first came from buffalo, elk, deer, and mountain sheep. Dresses and shirts were mostly made out of deerhides and elk hides because the skins were thinner, while the thicker buffalo hides were used as robes or blankets.

The making of a dress took a great deal of work, which started with a hunt. Men hunted the animals from which the hides came; women did the work of preparing hides. Native people of the Plains have always maintained a close relationship to the land and its resources, and expressed their respect for the animals they took. While on a hunt, they offered prayers in thanks for the life of the animal, its spirit, and for all that the animal would provide. Today, Assiniboine/Sioux men still say a prayer and offer tobacco—which helps send the prayer—and promise to make good use of the animal.



Adapted from Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.

FIGURE 1
Elk in North America Past and Present
● Elk Ranges today
● Elk Ranges circa 1850

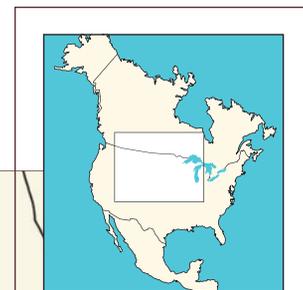
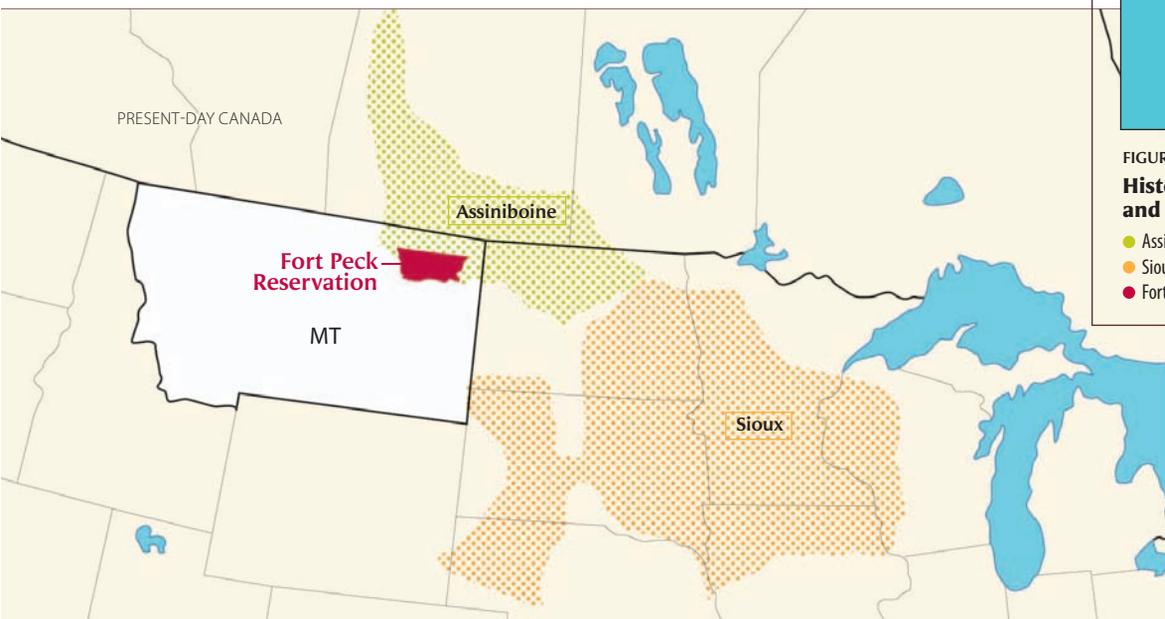


FIGURE 2
Historic Assiniboine and Sioux Areas
● Assiniboine Areas circa 1850
● Sioux Areas circa 1850
● Fort Peck Reservation, est. 1888



Adapted from Ives Goddard, "The Languages of the Plains: Introduction," *Handbook of North American Indians*, v. 13, part one, p. 62, Smithsonian Institution, 2001.



The women work to prepare the hides by removing the hair and tanning the skin. It is messy, hard work and requires muscles and brains—the muscles of the women, and the brains of the animal! In one tanning method, the hide is first soaked in water mixed with ashes for several days. Then it is put on a wooden frame and the hair is scraped off. Next, cooked brains of the animal are applied to the hide in order to soften it. The hide is then rinsed and stretched and pulled until—as one dressmaker says—your arms are “so tired, they feel like they will fall off!” This process is referred to as “brain-tanning” and is still done today to prepare hides that will be made into dresses, shirts, jackets, purses, and other items.



Sioux women preparing/tanning hides, ca. 1890. Photo by G. Ben Whittick. General Nelson A. Miles Collection, NMAI.

Decoration and Adornment

Native people of the Plains have long decorated their clothes and objects. Today, the heavily beaded dress is often thought of as the traditional style of clothing for Plains women. But before traders brought glass beads to the Plains, the materials used to decorate outfits for men and women came from the natural environment. Some of the earliest dresses and shirts were painted with natural materials, known as earth paints. Minerals and clays were among the first materials that would often be combined with buffalo fat and mixed in bowls made out of turtle shells to make paints. The hip bone of a buffalo, which when soaked in water becomes sponge-like, was sometimes used as

a paintbrush. The painted images found on many early hides and dresses show scenes of men on horses in battle or on a hunt. They tell stories of the bravery and honor of a husband, son, or father.

In addition to paints, people of the Plains used other natural materials to adorn their clothing. Most often the materials used were porcupine quills; animal teeth, such as those of elk; bone; bird or animal claws, such as those of bear; and shells that were most often acquired through trade with other tribes or non-Natives. The designs on dresses and the materials used reflect the people’s respect for the animals and the land.



Left: Early “paintbrushes” made of porous buffalo bone. Photo by Ernest Amoroso, NMAI.

Right: Painted Hunkpapa Lakota (Sioux) cloth dress (detail), ca. 1890. Photo by Ernest Amoroso, NMAI.

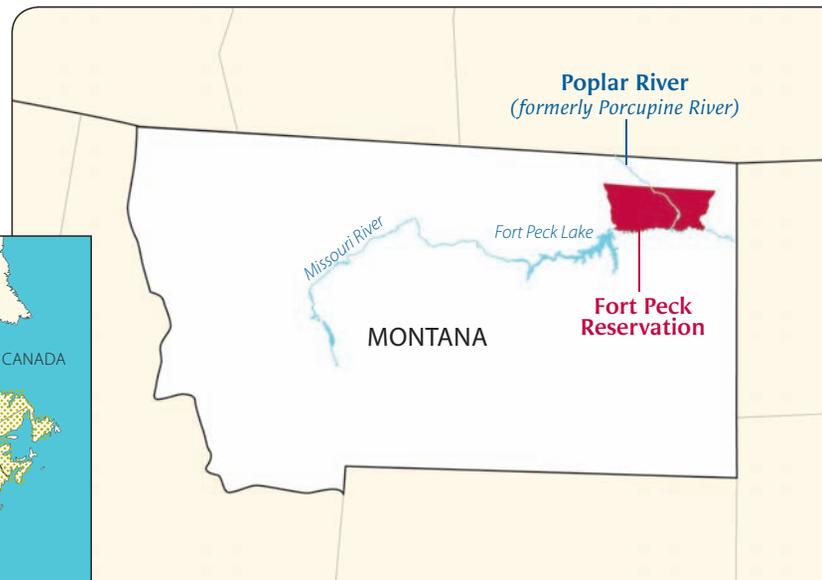
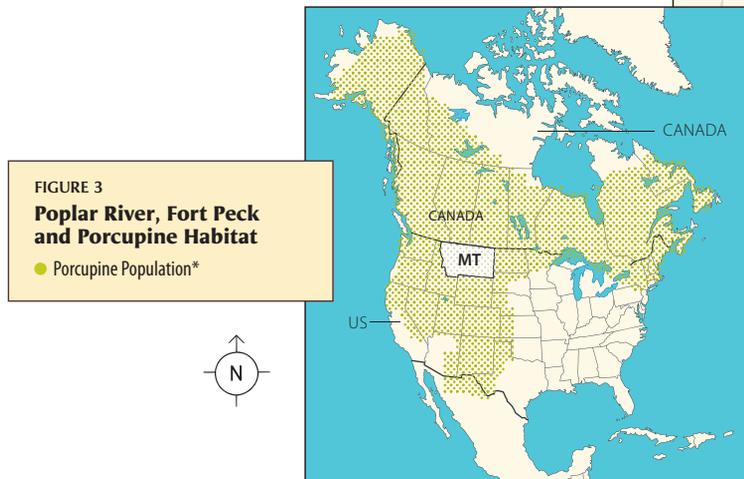




Lewis and Clark Journal Entry:

Capt. Lewis, May 3, 1805—*near the entrance of the river, we saw an unusual number of Porcupines from which we determined to call the river after that animal [sic], and accordingly denominated it Porcupine river [now called the Poplar River].*

Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*. Edited by Gary E. Moulton. Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1983–2001.

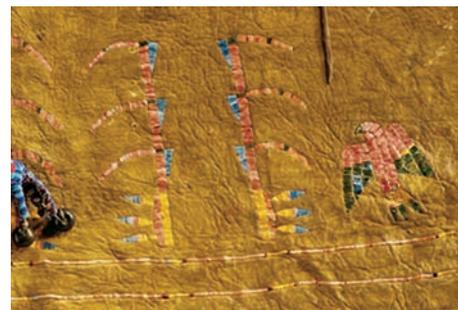
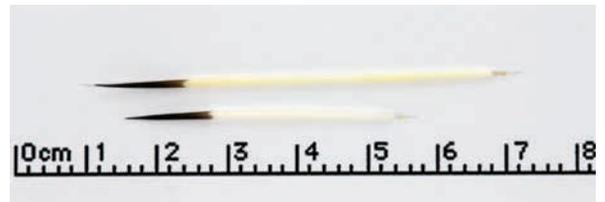


* The North American porcupine population has remained relatively stable over time.

In the past, elk teeth on dresses symbolized wealth and reflected the value the people of the Plains placed on the elk. Today, mountain designs on dresses show how they value the land and surroundings.

Porcupines are found along rivers and streams in great numbers in the Northern Plains. The sharp, needle-like quills that grow on porcupines were among the first materials used to decorate clothing. Porcupine quills were softened, flattened, and wrapped or woven around other material. They were also dyed different colors and used to make detailed designs. Natural materials such as plants, flowers, and berries were used to dye quills.

The process of beading is much easier than quillwork, since the quills have to be pulled from the hide, washed, dyed, dried, sorted by size, and then softened in the mouth and flattened. Although more difficult and time-consuming than beadwork, quillwork is still done by Plains artists today. Native people of the Plains continue to use the natural resources from their surroundings to make dresses. Today, they may buy hides and materials, or may hunt and gather what they need. Either way, they still honor the animals and the land—and the ways of their grandmothers, grandfathers, and ancestors of generations past.



Top: Porcupine quills vary in length and thickness and have to be sorted. The best quills often come from the sides of the porcupine. Photo by Katherine Fogden, NMAI.

Bottom: Sioux quilled robe (detail), ca. 1880. Hide, sinew, porcupine quills, seed beads, and brass bells. Photo by Walter Larrimore, NMAI. The quill design indicates that this robe was probably used during an adoption ceremony. During the ceremony, a child would be adopted by a member of the community, who would act much like a godparent today.



Plains Dresses: Layers of Meaning

All cultures celebrate special occasions and events in people's lives. In honor of celebrations, people often dress up and wear certain clothes or items to fit the occasion. Can you think of some special occasions for which you dress up? What do you wear?

Among the Assiniboine and Sioux, two Northern Plains tribes from Montana, cultural events and celebrations require special attire. For girls, special attire can be a beaded dress made of elkhide or deerhide—or a cloth dress covered with shells, elk teeth, or cone-shaped tin “jingles.” For men and boys, it might be a beaded outfit consisting of a belt, moccasins, vest, headband, and other items.

Some special occasions for which Plains people wear traditional clothing today are weddings, naming ceremonies (where a person gets a name in their Native language), community celebrations, honoring “give-aways” (celebrations in which things of value are given away to honor someone), and powwows (Native dance festivals and competitions). Whatever the occasion, the people of the Plains have always taken great pride in wearing their traditional clothes, sometimes referred to as regalia. A tremendous amount of time and effort goes into making regalia. For the girls and women of Plains tribes, the dress that one wears for special occasions is more than just a pretty dress.

A dress connects a girl to her tribe, her community, her family, and her ancestors. The dresses that girls and women wear are full of meaning, sometimes decorated with beads in designs and symbols that tell stories in

honor of family members. Long ago, the decorations on a woman's dress signaled her family's ability to trade for materials, or that her husband or father was a good provider. Many elk teeth on a dress meant great wealth. In the Crow tribe, dresses covered in elk teeth were sometimes given to a new daughter-in-law by her husband's family. The only elk teeth used on dresses are the two ivory eyeteeth. In the past, a boy would collect elk teeth over many years of hunting and would save them to be sewn by his mother or sisters on a dress for the woman he would marry. (See poster front, historic image of woman in elk tooth dress.)



Left: Four Sioux girls wearing beaded dresses, ca. 1890. Photographer unknown.

Above: NMAI National Powwow, 2005. Photo by Walter Larrimore, NMAI. This young man wears a heavily beaded vest and apron with buffalo designs. On his back he wears a feathered bustle.





Generations of Dressmakers

Joyce Growing Thunder Fogarty is Assiniboine/Sioux, which means she comes from both the Assiniboine and Sioux tribes of Fort Peck, Montana. She also comes from a long line of dressmakers and beadworkers (people who do beadwork). She has beaded for most of her life. Joyce was recently awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Southwest Association of Indian Arts, earning her the title of “master beader.” She has beaded dresses, vests, jackets, dolls, purses, belts, hatbands, moccasins, baby carriers or cradleboards, and horse “masks.” Once, she was even asked to bead moccasins for a dog. Joyce says that over the years she has probably beaded 250 belt buckles, all of which she has given away as gifts. When she made her first traditional Sioux dress for herself, it took her two years. She beads for a living, she beads as a hobby in her spare time, she beads because, as she says, beading is “in my blood.”



As a child, Joyce picked up her skill and love for this art form by watching her Sioux grandmother, who raised her and was always beading dresses. Her grandmother's influence has also trickled down to her daughter Juanita and her granddaughter Jessica. Three generations of beadworkers are going strong in the Growing Thunder family, all of them award-winning beadworkers, who produce beautiful works of art.

Jessica Growing Thunder Fogarty is seventeen years old. She has been beading since she was three and has won awards for her work since she was twelve. “I grew up every day of my life watching them and learning. They never sat me down and taught me how to bead. I just watched them,” says Jessica of her mother and grandmother. Her mother Juanita says that Jessica has a natural talent for beading. But Jessica says, “My mom and grandma have told me that I was born with it, but I think watching them has given me my talent.”



Juanita, Joyce, and Jessica Growing Thunder Fogarty, 2006.
Photo by Emil Her Many Horses, NMAI.



Above: Joyce Growing Thunder Fogarty drapes the beaded top of the unfinished Give Away Horses dress across her granddaughter Jessica. Photo by Emil Her Many Horses, NMAI

Above Center: Lakota Sioux beaded horse mask. The highly regarded horse of a Teton Sioux wore this beaded mask in the 1904 July 4th parade at Pine Ridge, S.D. Photo by NMAI Photo Services.

The Give Away Horses Dress: A Dress Rich with Honor and History

The National Museum of the American Indian commissioned the Growing Thunder family to make a Plains dress outfit for the 2007 exhibit, *Identity by Design: Tradition, Change, and Celebration in Native Women's Dresses*. The outfit includes accessories such as moccasins, leggings, belt, purse, and other items. Joyce and Juanita are used to spending a lot of time beading, but during the summer of 2006, they arose daily at three or four in the morning to begin working on the outfit, and then beaded for sixteen hours a day, seven days a week—averaging more than 110 hours a week.

The dress made for the exhibit is extra special. Made out of elkhide, it is beaded with Sioux designs and reveals Assiniboine influences. Everything on the dress stands for something important to the family, reflects their surroundings, and reinforces their cultural values. Its beaded designs tell the story of how Joyce's grandparents paid tribute to the grandchildren. Her creation, in turn, pays respect to her grandparents, Ben and Josephine Gray Hawk. It is a dress that honors the family from one generation to the next in a cycle of honoring.



Joyce refers to the dress as the “Give Away Horses Dress” because it tells the story of how her grandfather held a giveaway celebration in which he gave away horses in honor of his grandchildren. “My grandfather raised a lot of horses and gave away a lot of horses. He’d get a special horse and get it ready for the honoring. He would tie a war bonnet on its mane, and people would be on foot with ropes and he’d have the announcer announce the giveaway. They would let the horse go and crack the whip; it would take off and everyone would go running after it, trying to get it. That’s how it was done,” explains Joyce. “Down the road, I would like to do that.”

The dress illustrates the importance of the family and shows how traditions are passed down. “They are still giving away horses,” says Joyce. “They do that to honor their grandkids, or the younger ones do it to honor their grandparents. The horses are of great value and that, in turn, signals the value of the family.”

Joyce thinks back on her younger days when she helped her grandmothers make dresses. “I think about how it used to be watching them and how lucky I was to be raised by them,” Joyce says. She often misses them. But they are still with her all the time in

spirit—in fact, it is the work on the dresses that connects her to her grandmothers. “My grandmothers did it and I’m carrying on the traditions,” she says. It is work that connects Jessica to her grandmother as well. “The beading brings us together,” says Jessica. Her mom Juanita agrees. “It strengthens us as a family, because it gives everyone a purpose and self-worth, culture, and identity,” she says. “We know what our background is, and it ties us to the culture.”

The traditions will likely carry on in the Growing Thunder family. Joyce learned from her grandmothers and Jessica learned from her grandmother. Juanita, of course, learned beading and dressmaking from her mother. Juanita says, “People say it’s a dying art, but I say it’s not. It’s a living art and I want to help it continue.”

“The traditions are still alive and going. We’re still out there doing our traditional beadwork and quillwork,” says Joyce. “It has kept me strong and keeps my family strong.” Because of them, Sioux dressmaking traditions remain strong too. There is little doubt that the rumble of the Growing Thunders will be felt across many more generations.

Symbols Found in the Give Away Horses Dress



On this dress, the triangle-shaped designs represent mountains.

The blue background represents the color of lakes.



Horses symbolize wealth. A bonneted horse represents honor, the horse giveaway, or honoring of a family member.



Horseshoes represent how many horses were given away.



This symbol represents how many horses the family owned.