

# DENVER ART MUSEUM

DENVER, COLORADO

## *Department of Indian Art*

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GROUP OF UTE MEN (Ouray, Seated, in Middle)

*Leaflet No. 10*

*1930*

2nd Printing, March, 1945

## THE UTE INDIANS

**LOCATION.** The Ute Indians belong to the Shoshonean linguistic family. At the present time they are located as follows. The Wiminuche, Capote and Moache bands live on the Southern Ute Reservation and adjoining allotted lands in the southwest corner of Colorado. They number about 900. The Uinta, Uncompahgre and White River bands live on the Uinta Reservation and adjoining allotted lands in northeastern Utah. They number about 1,200. The total number of Utes is about 2,100.

**HISTORY.** The tribe, which was divided into seven principal bands, formerly roamed the entire central and western portions of Colorado and the eastern portion of Utah, including the eastern part of the Salt Lake and Utah valleys. To the south they extended into northern New Mexico. In Colorado their favorite haunts were the great central parks and the region about Colorado Springs. The Spanish in New Mexico and the early 19th century American explorers were the first whites with whom they came in contact. Beginning in 1849 a long series of treaties were made with the Americans, setting aside various reservations in Colorado and Utah. In 1880 the present reservations were established. In 1899 the eastern half of the Southern Ute Reservation was allotted to the Indians, the other half being left intact and forming the Southern Ute Reservation of today. On it lives the Wiminuche band, in general the most conservative group of the tribe. Much of the Uinta reservation has also been allotted.

Aside from the Meeker massacre in 1879, when the Indian Agent and a number of other whites were killed, the tribe remained on good terms with the whites, though there were a number of small conflicts with the early settlers. In 1906 a large group of the Utah Utes left the reservation, but they were persuaded to return without fighting.

The tribe produced one preeminently great Indian, the chief Ouray (1820-1880) and one of almost as fine a type, the chief Ignacio. During the latter part of his life Ouray was the chief of all the Utes and used all his unusual gifts to solve without bloodshed the problems caused by the advent of the white man.

**PHYSIQUE.** A very noticeable shortness of stature and a strong tendency to obesity are the principal physical characteristics of the Utes.

**DWELLINGS.** Originally the Utes lived in tepees of skin, or in small brush shelters, using the latter especially in the summer. Later the skin tepees were replaced by those of canvas, and these in turn are tending to give place to cabins of wood or stone. For details of these dwellings see Indian Leaflet No. 9.

**CLOTHING.** In former times deer and elkskins were made into shirts and leggings for the men, and ankle length dresses for the women. In warm weather the men wore only a breech cloth and the women a short kilt or skirt of shredded bark or buckskin. Ankle and knee length moccasins were worn by both sexes. For warmth, robes of elkskin, blankets woven from rabbit skins and Navaho blankets were worn. Except for the basket caps once worn by the women and various sorts of ceremonial paraphernalia no head covering was worn.

Nowadays both sexes wear American clothes to a very large extent, the women's calico dresses being cut along the lines of the old buckskin garments. The women are very fond of wide belts, usually made of leather. Colored flannel, called squawcloth, is still used in the making of dresses and hip-length leggings. Both sexes are fond of jewelry and other bright ornaments.

**FOOD SUPPLY.** The Utes were primarily a hunting tribe, so game of all sorts formed a very large part of their diet. The meat was either broiled or roasted when fresh, or jerked by drying in the sun. Chokecherries, mesquite beans, yucca fruit, wild berries of many kinds, grass seeds, dried grasshoppers and pinyon nuts were also important as foods. The seeds were ground into flour on metates, or flat hand grind stones, or in mortars of soapstone. Fish was eaten when obtainable.

The Utes are now turning more and more to agriculture and stock raising, especially those living on the allotted lands about Ignacio, Colorado and near the Uinta reservation. This tendency, coupled with the presence of the trading post with its stocks of all sorts of manufactured foods, have made the use of the old native foods less and less common.

**SKIN DRESSING AND BEADWORK.** The Utes have long been known as the makers of fine beadwork, most of their leather articles being decorated in this manner. The skins are prepared and the beads sewn on as described in Indian Leaflet No. 2. Ute beadwork cannot be identified by any easily described characteristics, a fondness for light green, light blue, and yellow beads being one of the few guiding signs. Beadwork is still made by them, but both the quantity and quality is diminishing.

**BASKETRY.** Rather primitive, coarsely woven and coiled willow baskets were made to a limited extent. The pitch covered water bottle with a large body and a narrow neck was the most common shape. Other forms were conical burden baskets, bowls, harvesting fans and women's caps.

**POTTERY.** Rough, undecorated and poorly shaped pottery was produced in limited quantities. Cook pots and pottery drums were the common varieties. Before the coming of the whites most pottery cooking utensils were obtained by trading from the Pueblos and the Jicarilla Apaches.

**PAINTING.** Crude human, animal and symbolic figures were painted in colors on hide and cloth articles, and on the rocks near their camps. Most of the paintings on hide and cloth were descriptive of dances, and those painted or cut into the rocks were hunting and battle scenes, maps, and pictures intended to bring good luck to travelers, warriors and hunters.

**GAMES.** In the old days the principal games were those involving the use of dice and various forms of gambling sticks; hoop and pole; ball juggling; double ball and shinny. Horse and foot racing have always been in favor. Modern card games, especially three card monte and poker, have been learned from the Mexicans and Americans and are now played extensively. Gambling is very common and heavy, the women being especially addicted to it.

**CUSTOMS.** Marriage was a matter of barter, though the woman had the right to refuse. Divorce was easy, being arranged by the return of the price originally paid for the bride. Polygamy was practised, but is now much less common. Marriage was exogamous, or out of the clan. Descent was through the father. The dead were buried as quickly as possible, very often in secret holes in the rocks. All possessions of the dead person were burned, and the survivors kept a year's period of mourning.

Before the influence of white civilization was felt labor was evenly divided, the man having the hard and often dangerous tasks of obtaining food by hunting, and of protecting his family from the ever present danger of enemies. The women did all the work about the camps.

There was little idea of distributing the food supply evenly throughout the year. When there was plenty to eat the people gorged, and when food was low they lived on starvation rations. Improvidence was common in all their activities.

In their primitive state their morals were very strict, theft, adultery, etc., being severely punished. After contact with the whites, however, they tended to become much more lax.

**DANCES AND MUSIC.** The Utes had many ceremonies involving dancing, the Bear and Sun dances being the most important. The former, always held in the spring, was especially characteristic of the tribe. It is still performed. Dragging Feet, Turkey, Scalp, Tea, Double, Lame, and Dog are the names of other dances performed at various times through the year.

The Utes have many songs of all types. They accompany them with large and small drums, flutes, and moraches, the latter being notched sticks which are held firmly against a drum or similar resonator and rubbed with another stick.

**TRIBAL ORGANIZATION.** Throughout most of their history the Utes have not been a united tribe, but have been divided up into independent bands, each with its own head chief. The chief Taiwi, or Tabby, at one time was the leader of most of the tribe, and Ouray was acknowledged as the supreme chief of all the Utes. Other leaders from time to time succeeded in amalgamating several of the bands into a confederacy. Important questions were decided by a meeting of many chiefs. The tribe was also divided into clans.

**RELIGION.** The Utes worshipped a bi-sexual power, the He-She, represented by the sun. This power was the creator of everything. In addition to this deity they believed in many hero and animal gods, the latter being the progenitors of the present animals. There were many legends of the powers and feats of these creatures, and the Indians made every effort to win their favor through the acts of the medicine men and by means of many small acts of individual magic.

The medicine men were very powerful and even today their influence is strong amongst the older Indians. In addition to acting as religious leaders they were the healers of the tribe, relying on spells, charms and their knowledge of the medicinal value of native plants to effect their cures. They were quite skilled in the setting of bones and the curing of arrow and bullet wounds. Christianity has made very little progress among the Utes.

Compiled from the following sources by Jean Allard Jeançon and F. H. Douglas:

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