

DENVER ART MUSEUM

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DEPARTMENT OF INDIAN ART

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MISTAKEN IDEAS ABOUT INDIANS

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1. **INTRODUCTORY.** White Americans have been in contact with Indians for nearly 500 years and in that time have built a tower of misbeliefs about our natives. Each one of the following headings concerns some wrong idea which is firmly believed by practically everybody. This leaflet attempts to make it possible for those who wish the facts to obtain them.

2. **THE VANISHING INDIAN** is not vanishing. From an original population of about 1¼ million north of Mexico the Indian decreased to about ¼ million by the 1890's. Since then he has been steadily increasing. The present Indian population of the United States and Canada is at least ½ million.

3. **LANGUAGE.** Indians do not speak "Indian," a simple grunting language used by all tribes. In the United States alone dozens of languages are still spoken. Some are related, others are as different as English and Chinese. Most have grammatical structures much more complicated than English. All use thousands of words. See Leaflet 51-52.

4. **SIGN LANGUAGE.** All Indians did not talk to each other with a common sign language. This method of communication by arm and hand gestures was used only by tribes in the Plains area and some bordering areas. After the introduction of Spanish horses around 1650, many tribes with different languages came together for the first time. Sign languages were developed then.

In other areas jargons or trade languages, like the Pidgin English of the Orient, were developed. In the northeastern quarter of the country a simple variety of the basic Algonkian speech was used, while in the Southeast a dialect of Choctaw called Mobilian was spoken intertribally. In the Southwest and much of California, Spanish was used to a considerable extent after 1600. In the Northwest the trade language was Chinook, a concoction of several European and Indian tongues.

5. **THE INDIAN WORD FOR CRADLE.** Perhaps the most common question asked by the public in an Indian museum is about one universally used Indian word for "cradle" or "baby-board." The answer is simply that there is no such word. All of the dozens of Indian languages have one or more names for the baby-carriers. No one of these words has ever gotten into general use as did "squaw" and "papoose," the words for woman and child in the speech of the Massachusetts Indians. A long list of Indian words for cradle is printed in Volume 18 Number 3 of the Colorado Magazine published in 1941 by the State Historical Society of Colorado.

6. **SYMBOLISM.** All Indian designs are not symbols which can be read to find meanings. Most Indian designs are just for decoration. When they are symbols (designs made to stand for a person, thing or idea) the meaning is, with rare exceptions, known only to the maker. An Indian of one tribe cannot interpret the designs of any or all others unless specifically trained. See Leaflet 61.

7. **ALL INDIANS ARE SMALL.** This idea is very widespread and has no relation to the facts. Some of the largest as well as some of the smallest people in the world are Indians, with all sizes in between. Possibly the notion grew from the fact that hundreds of thousands of people have never seen any Indians but the little Pueblo women on the station platforms of the Santa Fe railroad in New Mexico.

8. **THE DIRTY INDIAN** is dirty either because the White man made him so, or because he lives in desert areas where there is hardly enough water to drink. Early explorers speak again and again of how frequently the Indians bathed in streams and lakes. As the White man conquered the Indians he pushed them off into desert areas, then robbed and swindled them to the point of starvation. Under such circumstances no one of any race is much interested in bathing. Indians living under modern conditions are as clean as anyone else.

9. **THE LAZY INDIAN.** Under native conditions Indian women ran the house and family by working steadily but not hard. Men hunted for food and had to be ready at all times to defend their people against ever-present enemies. Hunting and fighting require short periods of extremely violent effort. The total amount of work done by men and women was about the same.

Then the conquering White man took away both of the activities of Indian men—and gave him nothing to replace them. Women's work, on the other hand, remained about the same. After Indian men learned new trades and occupations they proved to be industrious workers.

10. **BLANKET INDIANS.** All Indians do not, nor ever did, wear native woven blankets from the cradle to the grave. Blankets were only woven by the Pueblo and Navaho Indians of the Southwest, by a number of small tribes in the general region of Puget Sound in Washington and British Columbia, and by a few tribes in southeast Alaska. Elsewhere Indians wore many kinds of animal skin robes.

Eventually many tribes received and wore machine-made blankets introduced by the White man.

11. **WIGWAMS.** All Indians did not live in wigwams. This word applies only to the bark- or mat-covered huts of some tribes in the northeastern United States. Indians in other parts of the country lived in a wide variety of other dwellings. Leaflets 9, 12, 19, 20, 34, 39, 42, 48 and 50 give details about some of them.

12. **BIRCHBARK CANOES** were made by only a few tribes along the extreme north of the United States from the Atlantic to the Great Lakes region; and by some Canadian tribes. In the eastern United States south of this region most canoes were log dugouts, with a few of elm bark. No canoes were used on the Plains or in the Southwest. In southern California a few plank canoes were used. In northern California and up into Washington dugouts were made from logs. The Indians north of Washington on the coast of British Columbia and southeast Alaska made dugout canoes for travel on the sea, some as long as 65-76 feet.

13. **WAR BONNETS.** The war bonnet is a headdress made by setting an upright row of eagle feathers around a skin cap. There is often a feather-mounted strip hanging down the wearer's back.

This headdress, the most famous article of Indian make, was worn only by men belonging to tribes on the Plains between the Rockies and the Mississippi valley; and by some tribes bordering this area. It was not worn by women, nor in any other section of the United States. See Leaflet 110.

14. **WOMEN'S BEADED HEAD BANDS.** The combination of a band of beadwork around the forehead with an eagle feather sticking up behind is a very

modern addition to Indian women's costume. Some Indian girls wear it today, perhaps after seeing calendar pictures, movies and cartoons, but there is no trace of it in hundreds of old photographs and pictures of Indians living in a more or less native manner. Where the idea originally came from is not known to me.

15. **TOTEM POLES** were made only by a few tribes living on the Pacific coast and neighboring islands of British Columbia and southeast Alaska, the narrow strip running down the coast from the main mass of Alaska. Totem poles were not idols and had nothing to do with religion. They were made to show family names and legends and to mark graves. See Leaflets 79-80.

16. **WAMPUM** is a word perhaps more misunderstood than any other used in connection with Indians. It is derived from 'wamp-ompe-ag,' meaning 'it is made of shell' and was applied by east coastal tribes to a tube-shaped purple or white bead made from clam or conch shell. These beads were extremely difficult to make before metal tools were available, and were treasured by the Indians as ornaments. The Dutch colonists in New York needed something to serve for small change and arbitrarily decided to use wampum for this purpose, with the result that for a few decades in the early 1600's it served for money among Europeans and Indians along the Atlantic coast. Later the wampum beads were used by the Iroquois and other eastern tribes in the celebrated wampum belts; and still later they spread to the Mississippi Valley tribes to be used for earrings, necklaces and the like. Practically all of these beads were made by Indians or Whites with metal tools introduced from Europe.

The wheel- or disk-shaped beads of shell, other beads made by Indians, and the glass beads imported from Europe for use in beadwork are never correctly called wampum; and except for a few California tribes no Indians used shell beads for money in our sense.

Wampum, then, is a term only applied correctly to the slender tube-shaped purple, white, or mixed purple and white shell beads made and used as indicated above.

Compiled by F. H. Douglas from the following and many other sources:

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2. Reports over many years.

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3. Indian Leaflet 51-52. Indian Linguistic Stocks or Families.
4. Indian Leaflet 61. Symbolism in Indian Art and the difficulties of its interpretation.
5. Indian Leaflet 110. War Bonnets.
6. Indian Leaflet 79-80. Totem Poles.

MILWAUKEE PUBLIC MUSEUM

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8. Indian Terms for the Cradle and the Cradleboard—Victor F. Lotrich. The Colorado Magazine 18;3, 1941.

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9. Indians of the United States—Clark Wissler. New York, 1940.

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