

# Ancient Peoples



The Great Plains of North America, a vast land of earth and sky, extends from the Mississippi River in the east to the Rocky Mountains in the west. From north to south, it stretches from the Saskatchewan River to the Rio Grande. An immense and subtle beauty characterizes the region.

This land has supported Native Americans for thousands of years. Bands of hunter-gatherers came first. Small nomadic groups who hunted buffalo on foot and moved their camps with dogs followed. Later, other tribes settled along rivers in permanent farming villages. With the introduction of the horse by Europeans, Plains people followed the buffalo as never before. Nomadic life flourished, attracting other Native peoples from the woodlands and the mountains.

A small group of objects opens the exhibition. They reflect a multitude of ideas and traditions brought to the region by migrating peoples. Exhibited here are pipes central to religion, images of mythic beings, and representations of the buffalo. All contributed to what was to become the art of Plains culture.

# Following the Buffalo, 1700–1820

Plains Indian life became increasingly nomadic with the introduction of the horse.

## Land of Opportunity and Conflict

By the mid-1700s, virtually every tribe on the Plains had horses.... Horses and buffalo transformed the limitless grasslands into a land of opportunity.

Farming people went out to the Plains to hunt more often; people who had hunted buffalo on foot became far more efficient hunters on horseback, capable of following the immense herds deep into the Plains. People migrated and changed their way of life.

Smallpox hit the Plains in 1801–1802. Lakota winter counts recorded its arrival, and in 1804 Lewis and Clark passed deserted villages.

The Plains became an increasingly volatile world as Indian tribes and colonial nations jostled for position, trade, and dominance.

**Colin G. Calloway**  
Historian

## Plains Art Takes Form

Following the herds allowed for few material possessions, defining both culture and the arts. Objects created for life on horseback and in temporary camps also became artistic expression. These same objects embodied cultural meanings and religious beliefs.

Animal hides supplied the foundation for many possessions. They also served as the artists' canvas. Materials from the natural world evoked earth and sky and the mythic powers of the animals. Trade goods, particularly glass beads, wool cloth and paint, entered the artistic vocabulary.

Few works of art from this early period survived. Even so, the works displayed here reveal the formation of a distinctive Plains vision.

**Gaylord Torrence**  
Curator



William S. Soule, 1836–1908. *Cheyenne Camp, 1865–75*. Albumen print, 7 x 9 in (17.8 x 22.9 cm). National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Museum, NAA INV 01623500.



Antonio Zeno Shindler (1813 or 1823–1899). *Ta-tsan-op-ki-an (Flying Pipe), Head Soldier of the Yankton Sioux, Dakota 1867.* Glass negative, 8 x 7 in (20.3 x 17.8 cm). National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Museum, NAA INV 06595800.

## Flourishing In Dangerous Times, 1820–1860

Plains Indians thrived in a volatile world. Increasing wealth and power coexisted with conflict and disease.

### Mobility and Wealth amid War and Disease

Plains Indians experienced unprecedented mobility, wealth, and power. Buffalo provided meat and the materials for making tipis, clothing, tools, and weapons. Horses, better able to pull longer lodge poles and carry more weight than dogs, enabled their owners to live in larger tipis and also transport the new wealth acquired from buffalo hunts and trade networks.

War became an integral part of Plains Indian life. Tribes clashed over hunting grounds; warriors raided for horses and fought for honors and status.

But it was Americans, not other Indians, who threatened the Plains Indians' way of life. Between 1840 and 1890, the United States realized its "Manifest Destiny" to occupy the continent from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Emigrants on the overland trails degraded the environment, killed buffalo, and brought cholera, measles, and scarlet fever.

**Colin G. Calloway**  
Historian

### Spiritual Power and Beauty

By the early 1800s, Plains art embodied both the culture's worldview and its wealth. Spiritual power and beauty imbued ceremonial clothing, headdresses, horse gear, and weaponry. Pictographic histories of men's achievements in war adorned robes, shirts, and tipis. Visionary images appeared on shields and drums. The sacred geometric imagery of women was quilled, beaded and painted on robes, dresses, moccasins, and containers. Plains art had come of age.

**Gaylord Torrence**  
Curator



Wi-hu'-wo-pa, Ear of Corn (Wife of Lone Wolf), Oglala, 1860–1874. Albumen print, extract from the *Descriptive Catalogue of Photographs of North American Indians* by W. H. Jackson, composed by William Henry Jackson in 1876–1877. Paris, musée du quai Branly, PA000163.253.

# Death of the Buffalo, 1860–1880

This period was marked by the loss of the buffalo, the very heart of Plains Indian art, culture, and spirituality.

## Starvation or Reservations

Buffalo likely numbered in excess of 30 million in the early 1800s. By 1895, fewer than 1,000 survived...

Formerly mobile and independent, hunters now faced a choice between starvation and the reservations. Tribes once prosperous and powerful were reduced to poverty and dependence on government rations.

The horse-and-buffalo culture that Plains Indian peoples built in the 1700s and 1800s collapsed... under assault from epidemic diseases, American soldiers, government agents, buffalo hunters, railroads, and settlers.

**Colin G. Calloway**  
Historian

## Tattered Tipis

The people, for one and sometimes two decades, lived near [reservation] agency headquarters. They camped in tattered skin tipis, and tipis and tents hand-sewn from canvas that was issued as annuities (treaty payments).

**Arthur Amiotte, (Oglala Lakota)**  
Artist and Scholar

## Losses Mourned

Plains Native people regret and mourn the drastic and sudden losses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the lands, the buffalo, the ceremonies, and the lives of our ancestors.

**Emma I. Hansen, (Pawnee)**  
Scholar

## Still Flourishing

Even in crisis, the arts continued to flourish. Distinct tribal styles became fully realized. Ledger drawing emerged as an important form of expression. New warrior societies produced distinct regalia.

**Gaylord Torrence**  
Curator

# Living on Islands of Ancestral Land, 1880–1910

Plains Indians endured relocation onto reservations, often within tribal homelands. Creativity continued.

## Resilience through Creativity

There must have been an inner strength in our ancestors. As Plains Indian people seemed to reach the nadir of their existence, they did not die off or disappear into the larger American society. Instead, they experienced a renewed sense of creativity.

**Emma I. Hansen, (Pawnee)**  
Scholar

## In a Foreign Place

On individually allotted reservation lands, communities grew with the establishment of government substations, day schools, churches and non-Indian trading posts. Religious groups established boarding schools near the reservation agencies. Distant boarding schools sprang up, some in eastern U.S. cities, to remove Native students from tribal society and acculturate them to American lifestyles.

**Arthur Amiotte, (Oglala Lakota)**  
Artist and Scholar

## Tradition Finds New Forms

Despite poverty and hardship, creative expression continued. Artists developed new forms to maintain traditions and support community life. Religious movements, the Ghost Dance and the Native American Church, inspired ceremonial regalia. Wild West Shows and Fourth of July celebrations encouraged artists to make clothing and gifts. Need and opportunity stimulated the creation of works for outside markets.

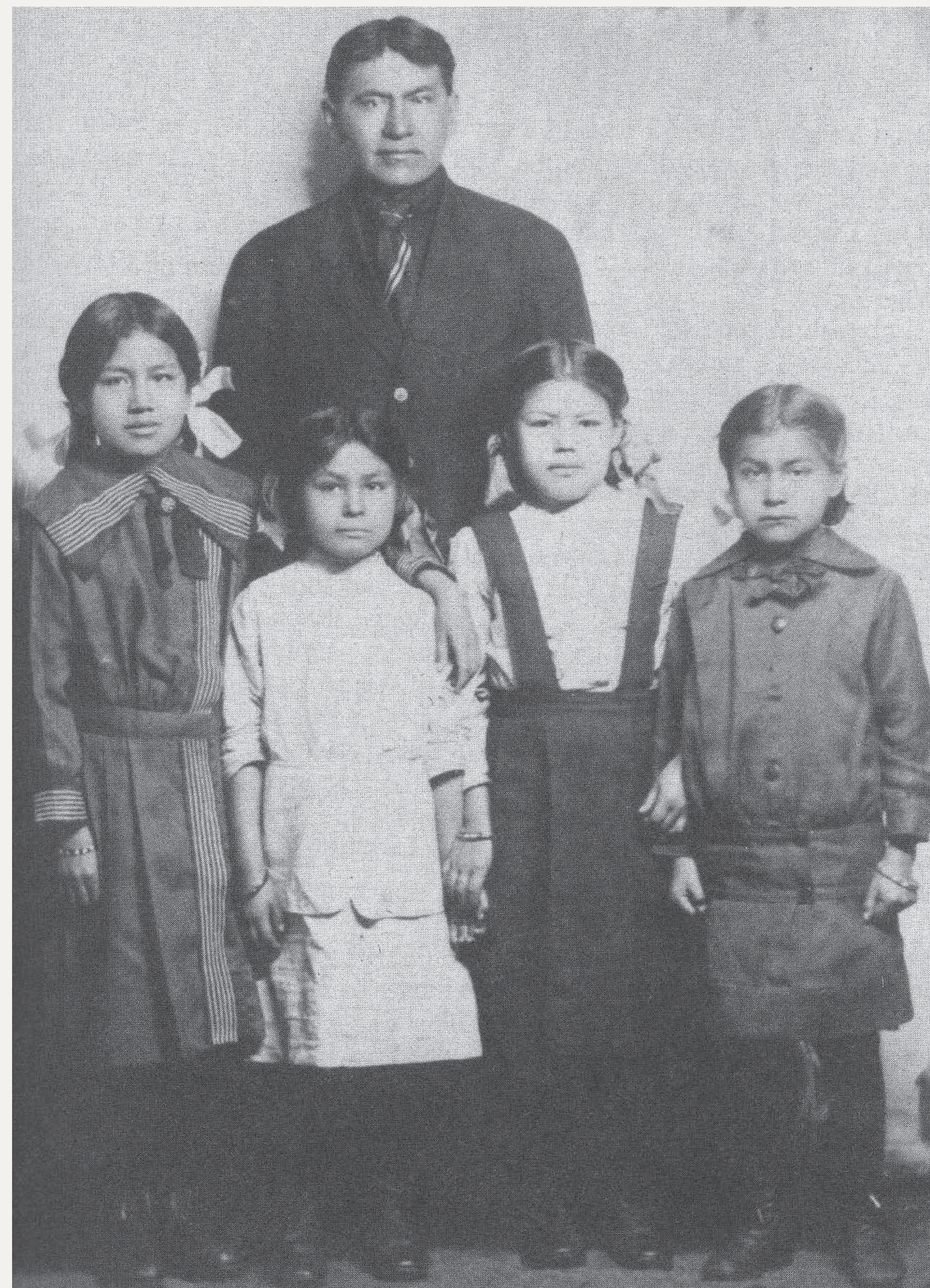
**Gaylord Torrence**  
Curator



John A. Anderson, 1869–1948. *A Brule Sioux Woman Painting a Paddle*. Rosebud Agency, South Dakota, 1893. Glass negative, 5 x 8 in (12.7 x 20.3 cm). Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska. RG2969-02-226.

# Living in Two Worlds, 1910–1965

In the 20th century, Plains peoples lived on reservations and in nearby towns and cities. They continued to adapt.



Albert Hensley, Winnebago, with his two daughters and two nieces on their way to the Springfield, S.D. school.  
Nation Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 75, Entry 1327, Carlisle School Student Records, file #2144.

## Finding Autonomy

Now isolated on little homesteads and small homogenous reservation communities distant from agency officials, Natives discreetly continued the tribal traditions of gathering for feasting when food was available. They prayed with the sacred pipe and sang the old Sun Dance songs...

Young Native families found employment in burgeoning post-war white towns and cities near reservations. Thus began a pattern of living and visiting part-time on the reservation, but mostly living where they worked.

**Arthur Amiotte, (Oglala Lakota)**  
Artist and Scholar

## Regaining Control

The history of Plains Indian people is one of endurance and survival. The nations worked to regain control of their lands, governing structure, religious rights, and education. They also turned to restoring significant cultural elements that had been lost or nearly lost.

**Emma I. Hansen, (Pawnee)**  
Scholar

## Tradition and Modern Life

As a result of modern life, traditions intermingled. Tribal nations came together around the powwow. Elaborate new regalia emerged. Increasing interaction with Euro-Americans prompted the development of easel painting. It carried Plains imagery and its meanings into the larger artistic dialogue.

**Gaylord Torrence**  
Curator



Pine Ridge Powwow, Getty Images.

# Contemporary Artistic Revival, 1965–2014

Today's Plains artists approach their work within the complexities of our global times.

## Buffalo Are Returning

As many of the works in this exhibition attest, the values and beliefs that continue to give meaning to Plains Indian life have proven more difficult to destroy than the buffalo herds. And today the buffalo are returning.

**Colin G. Calloway**  
Historian

## Meeting New Challenges

The art of Plains Indian peoples reflects traditions, transitions, adaptations, and innovations from the ancient past into the present. Within historic Plains cultures, artists held important roles as providers of both secular and sacred materials. Contemporary artists preserve cultural identities while meeting new challenges and experimenting with new media.

**Emma I. Hansen, (Pawnee)**  
Scholar

## Artists of Earth and Sky

The art of Plains people, over their long history, stands as a continuum of vision, accomplishment, and cultural survival. It is a testament to the creative brilliance of artists of earth and sky through time. Today's artists create works that reflect both the persistence and the renewal of traditional expression. Their art is also alive with new forms. Some artists engage with markets devoted to Indian art, while others create for family and community. Still others produce works that resonate within the world of international art.

**Gaylord Torrence**  
Curator