

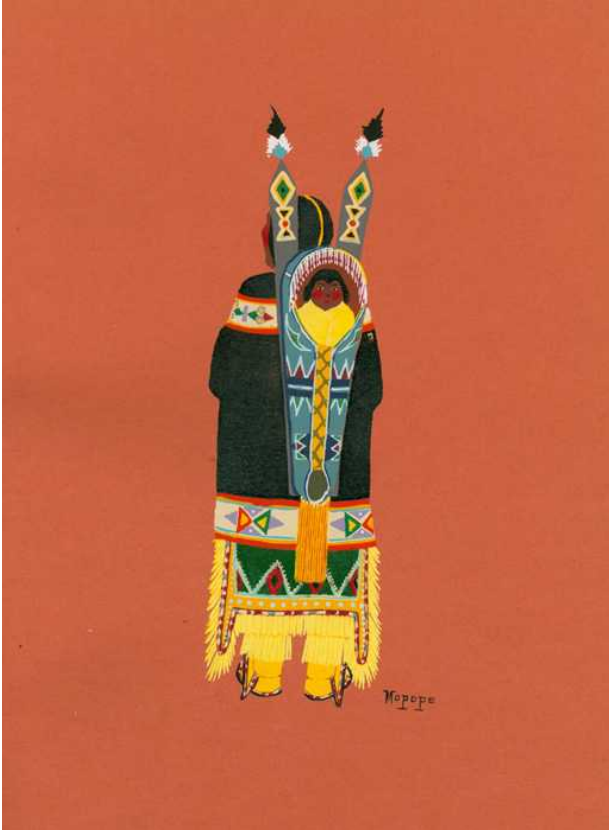
Wearable Art
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Marc Frucht
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Wearable art is not foreign to Kiowa people. In fact it is quite central to their day to day life ways, culture and style. Wearable art can appear to make up one overall fashion statement for Kiowa people but there is so much more to it than that.

For instance the cradleboard is a primary focus of a Kiowa baby's first months. Many Kiowa children spend their first six months or so inside them. Essentially this is their wearable art given to them by their family. Oftentimes it is made for them before they were born.

Many Kiowa mothers carry their baby in the cradle board (sometimes called a papoose, although that word is often used to describe a newborn baby his or her self) around with them on their backs. This frees up the mother's hands without the baby ever sensing that his mother has put him "down," or "away." She can still talk with him and explain things she is doing, which helps him learn to talk and communicate at very early stages of his life. This doesn't necessarily mean he will talk earlier but his listening skills are growing very rapidly.

Many Kiowa cradleboards start from two pieces of wood forming a large "V" shape. The top part is often made extra long with lots of paint and fringe decorating the cradleboard throughout.



Some of these cradleboards are crafted with soft bedding made from shredded bark or crumpled grass; and sometimes there's even soft fur inside. Many Kiowa children stay in their cradleboard for half a year or so; and often times their mom will dangle items off the two high points that will amuse and entertain the baby during their first months wearing the cradleboard.

This must be inspiring to spend your first waking months surrounded by many different kinds of artwork right on your person and also surrounding your mother at all times. It's no wonder Native American children oftentimes grow up to be very creative people with a desire to make art every waking hour.

A long and boring discussion of isometrics and infant strength precedes this statement. And thank goodness, because this little girl below totally needs the anthropologist's approval.



Louise Smoky, a Kiowa, in a cradle board. Charles H. Stephens collection; Penn Museum image #149915

This photograph in the collection of artist **Charles H. Stephens** presents a smiling **Kiowa** child, Louise Smoky. And I'm pretty sure that she's cool with being in the cradle board.

Incidentally, there is a fascinating descriptive picture of a Navajo cradleboard at:

<http://navajocentral.org/cradleboard2.gif>

And lastly, along "Pan-Indian" lines, Buffy St. Marie champions a cause called the Cradleboard Project which is chock full of information at <http://www.cradleboard.org>

"When you wear your dress, you're carrying the spirit of all the people who gave you the lessons of life, who made dresses before you -- dresses that you can look at today and be inspired by."

-- Keri Jhane Myers (Comanche), 2005

An older girl will start wearing and adorning an elk tooth dress made of three hides from a fairly early age. There isn't much information in available literature as to what younger girls wear before this and after the cradleboard; but as the pictures here suggest, young adult clothing is every bit as expressive, inspirational and stylized as the cradleboards that the tiniest Kiowa people are adorned in.

Elktooth beads are often mistaken for shells when galleries picture Kiowa dress for some reason. Perhaps because the many teeth get organized in rows similar to how cowry shells are laid out on some African dresses museum curators might have elsewhere in their collections.



As Myers explains in her video at the NMAI site, a deer hide is folded over to make the top of a three-hide dress and she says that the two legs hanging on each side of the dress are "kept as a marker to show that we still respected the animals that the hides came

from." Myers is Comanche and it's notable that the Kiowa and Comanche have shared some similar styles of dress for a very long time.

This respect shown to the animal throughout the making of wearable art is similar to the respect shown to each other and their environment as well as toward people who are not kin. Honoring all the people who taught you these things and did these things before you can show how you relate with everyone and everything around you, but also can show that you were listening and learning from your observations while travelling around in your cradleboard!



Abstract floral appliqué-style beadwork is distinctively Kiowa. This dress also shows how Kiowa-style dresses have extended capes. The separate cape is held in place by a belt.

Kiowa three-hide dress, ca. 1930.
Oklahoma. Hide, seed beads, mescal beans, ribbons, sequins, tin cones, sinew. 13/5854

Identity
tradition, change, and celebration in r

Three-hide dresses are sometimes made of buckskin that's been painted and beaded with fringe also. This next image shows a lot of color and line work. A great deal of consideration is taken regarding not just color and design but placement. The dress in the picture is said to be from the 1930s and contains seed beads, mescal beans, ribbons, sequins and tin cones. Once again so much is taken from the natural world and carried around with them from day to day; that a Kiowa person isn't really the intended recipient of Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh's contemporary suggestions to hang "a reminder--such as a branch, a leaf, a painting, or some inspiring words" over their bed because Kiowa people are already carrying so much from the natural world right with them as they go through life.

Russell Thornton describes Kiowa cultural expression fairly well in his book titled, Studying native America: problems and prospects.

Kiowa have their own view of the ownership of symbols. One important cultural expression is the Tipi with Battle Pictures. "Ornamented with fine pictures of fighting men and arms on one side and wide, horizontal bands of black and yellow on the other," the tipi has been reproduced in various forms since 1845, but only "according to distinctive principles relating to the individual ownership of intangible property." " Although the Kiowa have experienced broad changes in their society and culture over the past century, "many concepts regarding rights and restrictions over intangible property remain based on a traditional legal system." One important concept is that individuals own their various "accomplishments and the right to control their representation," be they exploits in battle, songs, designs, or names.¹¹⁰ In 1994 I gave a lecture on repatriation at Cameron University in Lawton, Oklahoma. Afterward, a young Kiowa man came to me and asked about

(Thornton,404)



Next to the Kiowa battle dress pictured above (from the NMAI site) there is a Kiowa headdress dated approximately 1890. Now this gives some cognitive dissonance because many authors say Kiowa people were not known for wearing long headdresses. Often times warriors wore Otter fur with sometimes just one or two upright feathers.

Photos much later from WWII and the Vietnam era depicting Kiowa and Comanche people wearing feathered headdresses make more sense when “Pan-Indian” culture is taken into consideration as well as film in the 1910s and 20s. But artifacts from the 1890s give pause unless archivists are making much of just one or several instances of people wearing something that other people are better known for, when they’ve returned from long travels perhaps.

So as seen in this photo the battle dress uses wool instead of three deer hides. But there is still a similarity in how it will form over the body of the person wearing it. The military insignia are placed throughout with an eye on the aesthetic just like with the other items taken from the natural world. Thread is used where there was sinew in others; and white plastic recreations of elk teeth are sewn onto the wool rather than actual teeth onto hide.

Crafting clothing by hand is clearly quite important to the Kiowa and the payoff from taking much time to make things will surely be their durability and the very fact that they can be repaired year after year.

There is so much beauty here that many people might wonder why someone would wear so much art rather than put it in a showcase where it will breakdown less from rain and wind and washing and wearing. They might even question why someone would make so many beautiful art pieces meant to be worn in the first place.

But another way to look at it might be that if someone must wear clothing for so many of their waking hours, why not invest the time to build it into just one more aspect of their own storytelling; and maintain it over time.

Sources:

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