



MOCCASINS

“Moccasin” is the word we generally use to describe the footwear of the native peoples of North America. Early European explorers and settlers adopted this word from similar sounding words used by the Native Americans of Eastern North America, and used it to describe all Native American footwear, regardless of time, location, or source.

While they were found everywhere in North America, moccasins were unique to both location and tribe. The moccasin’s sole is the first characteristic that varied. Native Americans living east of the Mississippi River generally wore soft-soled moccasins made of one piece of deer or elk hide. This buckskin is soft and flexible after tanning. Native Americans living west of the Mississippi River generally wore hard-soled moccasins. These were made from two or more pieces of buffalo or moose hide. Rawhide was often used as one of the two layers that formed the sole. This hardened leather provided greater protection from the cactus and harsh prairie grasses of the plains and deserts that dominate the western landscape.

The second distinguishing characteristic of moccasins is the stitching used to complete the shoe. Traditionally, sinew was used as thread and was passed through holes punched in the leather with a bone tool. Knots were kept on the outside of the moccasin for comfort. Small variations in the stitching could indicate one tribe from another, or one person’s footprint from another.

The third distinguishing characteristic, decoration, was highly individualized both among tribes and individuals. Flaps of leather or fur might be added for comfort or style. Beads and quills were sometimes used in geometrical patterns. Some moccasins were painted; others had ribbons and/or bells attached. Ceremonial moccasins, especially among Plains tribes, were often completely covered in beads. While the basic construction of Native American moccasins may have been similar throughout North America, decorative patterns and stitching were significant enough that Indian people could often identify a person’s tribe simply from the design of his/her footwear.

We think of moccasins as the general footwear of Native Americans in North America. Because we have applied one word to describe these artifacts, we tend to think of them as being the same. They are not. Moccasins are the creative product of over 200 cultural groups. They are distinctive in materials, construction and decoration. Upon close inspection, we should be able to identify the small differences that make each pair unique.