



THE PIPE BAG

A Native American pipe bag holds the most spiritual and important artifact in Native American life, a pipe. For Native Americans across the continent, the pipe represents the connection between the physical and the spiritual worlds. Pipe ceremonies preceded important life events, and a different pipe was used for different occasions. There was a “war pipe,” a “peace pipe,” a “trade pipe,” one reserved for marriage ceremonies, and another for when a child received his/her name. Regardless of the event, the pipe ceremony provided the means through which all involved could connect with each other and with the greater spiritual world.

The pipe and its associated elements were sacred. For ceremonial pipes, the bowl was usually made from catlinite, an easily worked stone, which becomes hard when exposed to the air. The quarries for this stone are found in South Dakota and southern Minnesota. So many different nations used this stone that the quarries were traditionally neutral ground, even among nations who were at war. Tobacco was smoked in the pipes and also scattered on the ground as an offering to the gods. It is thought that tobacco was the main ingredient for pipe ceremonies because its roots went deep into the soil while its smoke rose to the heavens. The fire in the pipe represented the fire of the sun, the source of life. The smoke that emerged from the pipe represented Native American prayers in physical form. The smoke left the mouth as truth, touched everything and became part of all that is as it rose and disappeared into the heavens. The shaft of the pipe provided the physical connection between the individual who participated and the spiritual world where the prayers (smoke) were received. The pipe, then, incorporated and exemplified a Native American’s relationship with the spiritual world. As such, it was the most important spiritual artifact in Native American society.

The person responsible for the pipe, the keeper of the pipe bundle, held special significance. Inside the pipe bag were the elements necessary for a pipe ceremony: the pieces of the pipe, the tobacco, and the flints to make fire. The pipe was always carried in pieces, and only assembled when a ceremony was imminent.

Leather pipe bags were used to hold pipe bowls, stems and tobacco when not in use. Women decorated the bags according to tribal styles. Common features included an elongated rectangular shape with an opening at one end and fringe on the bottom. While the bottom of the bag was often heavily decorated, the open end was left relatively plain so it could be tucked under the belt of the wearer. Decorative patterns varied from the realistic to the abstract. Designs were also copied and adapted from one group to another so that, today, decoration cannot be used to identify a specific pipe bundle with a specific group. After contact, many Native American nations incorporated European symbols and designs, crosses for example, into their decorations, providing yet another example of the intercultural adaptation and exchange that existed in the Southwest and further complicating specific identification of artifact and maker.