



MOCCASINS

“Moccasin” is the word we generally use when we refer to the footwear of the indigenous 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 applied it to all Native American footwear, regardless of time, location, or source. Some, like the Narragansett word “*Mockussinchass*,” sound and look very much like “moccasin.” Others, like the Blackfoot word “*Siksika*,” do not. For the sake of simplicity, we have chosen to follow the long-accepted practice of using “moccasin” to refer to the traditional footwear of Native American peoples.

While they were found everywhere in North America, moccasins were distinctive to both location and tribe. The moccasin’s sole is the first characteristic that differentiates this traditional footwear. 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 pliable after tanning. Native Americans living west of the Mississippi River generally wore hard-soled moccasins. These were constructed 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. Stitching varied from tribe to tribe and place to place. Traditionally, sinew was used as thread and was passed through holes punched in the leather with a bone awl. Knots were kept on the outside of the moccasin for comfort. Subtle variations in the stitching could distinguish 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 tribal affiliation 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 composition, construction and decoration. Upon close inspection, we should be able to identify the subtle differences that make each pair unique.