

Brooklyn Museum

Teacher Resource Packet

Tipi: Heritage of the Great Plains

February 18–May 15, 2011



Tipi: Heritage of the Great Plains



About the Artist

Vanessa Jennings (born 1952) is a Kiowa beadworker and cradleboard maker. She is the granddaughter of Stephen Mopope, a painter and member of the Kiowa Five, a group of artists who received international acclaim beginning with the 1928 International Art Congress. Jennings herself is the recipient of a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. She began beading as a child, learning the craft from her grandmother. Jennings says that she strives to make her pieces “as special as my grandmother’s beadwork. Every time she finished something . . . it was a miracle.” As an artist working in a traditional medium, Jennings sees herself as continuing the Kiowa culture to provide future generations with an “unbreakable link” to their heritage.

About the Exhibition

Tipi: Heritage of the Great Plains focuses on the tipi as the center of Plains culture and social, religious, and creative traditions from the early nineteenth century to the present. The exhibition examines the tipi as an architectural form, an expression of Plains artistic and cultural identity, and an interior space for domestic and ritual use.

Representing a large number of tribes from the Northern, Central, and Southern Plains, the exhibition features three full-size tipis (two with furnished interiors), objects from the Brooklyn Museum’s collection of historical Plains material, selected works from other museums, and objects by contemporary Plains artists. In addition to historical and contemporary objects, *Tipi* includes photographs of contemporary Plains family and community life and images of contemporary Native American architecture inspired by the tipi form.

Organized thematically, *Tipi* explores the traditional role of women, who were the owners and makers of the tipi itself as well as the furnishings, clothing, and accessories kept within it; the traditional role of men as warriors, whose military exploits are depicted on tipi covers and liners; and the tipi as the center of childhood and family life.

Background Information

The Kiowa tribe is one of more than fifty Native American tribes that reside on the Great Plains, an expansive region on the North American continent that extends as far south as Texas and reaches northward into Canada. Native Americans of the Plains once lived a nomadic lifestyle, following herds of buffalo, their main source of food, and other grazing animals. Their portable tipi homes made it possible for them to travel across the Great Plains. Today, most Plains people live in modern homes, but the tipi remains an important part of their tribal cultures. Another ongoing part of Plains culture is the powwow, a celebratory intertribal gathering. Lasting from a day to a week and most often held in the warmer spring and summer months, powwows begin with a Grand Entry, in which the participants parade onto the powwow grounds, followed by a prayer. The rest of the powwow features singing and dancing, with highly competitive contests.



Description of Boy's Powwow Vest

This child-sized powwow vest is made of vibrant orange wool. It is elegantly decorated with symmetrical designs. The prominent floral motifs showcase Jennings's intricate beadwork. Gold sequins accent the floral motifs and the top of the geometric border. The geometric motif is continued in the trim that edges the front opening and armholes. Blue, white, and green satin ribbons representing a rainbow create the fringe along the bottom of the vest.

About the Boy's Powwow Vest

The vest is only one part of two complete identical outfits. It was made for Vanessa Jennings's grandson Cade (see photograph at right) to wear for a powwow. The other was created for her husband, Carl (Cade's grandfather), who designed the ribbonwork on both vests. This regalia was made for Carl and Cade to wear at dance competitions held during powwows. Jennings designed the outfits to match in order to teach Cade about the shifting of generations: someday his grandfather would no longer be able to dance, but Cade would grow into his grandfather's suit. Likewise, a child from the next generation will be able to wear Cade's regalia.



Questions for Viewing

The creation of the boy's powwow vest required highly skilled craftsmanship. The artist sewed thousands of tiny beads to form each stylized flower. Take a moment to look closely at the vest. Notice the intricate beadwork. Look for the other details on the vest. In your own words, describe what you see.

Cade, Vanessa Jennings's grandson, is thirteen years old. He attends his local public school, likes to listen to popular music, and wears clothes that are probably very similar to your own. In what ways is this vest, made for dance competitions at powwows, similar to clothes you might wear for a special occasion or for a dance competition? What are some of the differences?

Look at the photograph of Cade wearing the powwow outfit when he was eight years old. How do you think Cade might feel about participating in Kiowa traditions?

Activities

History and Language Arts

Vanessa Jennings learned beading from her grandmother. Cade learned to dance from his grandfather. What traditions are passed down in your family and/or culture? In what ways have they changed over time? Interview your relatives to find out about your family traditions. How are special occasions celebrated? What does the older generation teach the younger generation? How was life different for the adults in your family when they were growing up? What was it like to be a young person in your grandparents' time, and in your great-grandparents' time? Write a family history of your own family that shares, explains, and details your traditions.

View "The People" (*Stateline*, episode 1007, OETA, first aired May 2009, <http://www.oeta.tv/component/content/article/208-statelinearchive/465-1007-qthe-peopleq.html>), a documentary film about Plains people today that includes interviews with Vanessa Jennings and her grandson Cade Mopope. The film shows Cade being inducted into the Black Leggings Warrior Society. Notice the regalia that he dons for this celebration. Compare it to the boy's powwow vest. To judge from what you have seen in the film and your observations about the boy's powwow vest, in what ways do you think the Black Leggings Warrior Society ceremony is different from a powwow?

Visual and Performing Arts

The boy's powwow vest displays exquisite workmanship and fine materials: fine wool imported from England, satin ribbons, and beautiful beaded flowers. Design your own dance regalia showcasing the best materials you can imagine. What kinds of detail work will you add to make the piece special? Will you choose designs that are symbolic or simply aesthetically pleasing?

Consider the kind of dancing for which the regalia will be worn. Make sure the form of the outfit is functional, so that the wearer can execute the steps of the dance without tripping on the fabric.

Next, choreograph a dance to go with your outfit. Choose a style of dance with which you are familiar. Who will participate in the dance? Is this dance for a special occasion? How do the outfit and the dance complement each other?

Resources

Do All Indians Live in Tipis?: Questions and Answers from the National Museum of the American Indian. Foreword by Rick West. New York: Harper Collins Press in association with the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 2007.

This book addresses stereotypes and answers common questions about Native American culture.

Family Guide: *Tipi: A Home on the Great Plains.* New York: Brooklyn Museum, 2011.

Available in the exhibition, this Family Guide is designed to help young people explore the structure and function of the tipi with an adult companion.

Laubin, Reginald, and Gladys Laubin. *The Indian Tipi: Its History, Construction and Use.* 2nd ed. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007.

This book details the art, design, and structure of the tipi throughout history.

National Museum of the American Indian. <http://www.nmai.si.edu>.

The website of the National Museum of the American Indian, part of the Smithsonian Institution, contains valuable resources for educators, students, and individuals interested in learning more about Native American culture.

Rosoff, Nancy B., and Susan Kennedy Zeller, eds. *Tipi: Heritage of the Great Plains.* New York and Seattle: Brooklyn Museum in association with University of Washington Press, 2011.

The exhibition's catalogue contains a collection of essays by Native and non-Native artists and scholars about Plains culture, centered around the tipi.

Warren, Betsy. *Let's Look Inside a Teepee.* Austin, Tex.: Ranch Gate Books, 1989.

This book introduces young readers to the tipi.

This resource was written by Senior Museum Educator Kristin Scarola, with assistance from Nancy Rosoff and Susan Kennedy Zeller, curators of Arts of the Americas.

The exhibition has been developed by a collaborative team of Native and non-Native curators, scholars, and artists. Nancy B. Rosoff, Andrew W. Mellon Curator, Arts of the Americas, and Susan Kennedy Zeller, Ph.D., Associate Curator, Native American Art, led the team. *Tipi* is accompanied by a catalogue published by the Brooklyn Museum in association with the University of Washington Press.

Tipi: Heritage of the Great Plains is organized by the Brooklyn Museum.

Exhibition sponsor



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Cover and pages 3, 6, 7 (reverse): Vanessa Jennings (Kiowa, b.1952); ribbonwork by Carl Jennings (b. 1946). *Boy's Powwow Outfit*, 2006. Ft. Cobb, Oklahoma. Orange wool broadcloth, taffeta, glass beads, feathers, buckskin, hide, horsehair, satin. Courtesy of Vanessa Jennings

Page 2: Vanessa Jennings. Photo courtesy of Vanessa Jennings

Pages 3, 8: Cade Lean Elk Mopope (Kiowa, b. 1998) wearing powwow outfit, Ft. Cobb, Oklahoma, 2006. Photo: Summer Rae Morgan

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