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**Author(s):** Sydney Sheehan

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**Abstract:** *Oftentimes indigenous objects in Western museums are displayed with little to no context, making them seem divorced from the presence of their community. This article engages with the Southern Cheyenne's Child's Moccasins on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition Art of Native America. By taking a critical approach to the exhibition practices, this article hopes to present a case for the embodiment of community within their display. With specific attention given to a visual analysis of the Child's Moccasins, as well as a discussion of the generationality behind their creation, the article intends to broadly highlight possible ways of engaging with these objects in the museum space.*

**Key Words:** *Southern Cheyenne (Tsistsistas), Beadwork, Native American, Museum Studies, Art History, Collecting, Indigeneity, Craft.*

## Beaded Soles: Finding Footprints in the Art of Native America

The Southern Cheyenne *Child's Moccasins* on view in the *Art of Native America* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art are exquisite in their level of detail. Only a hint of tanned-leather is made visible with these small moccasins, for they are almost completely encompassed by brightly colored glass beads. The moccasins measure  $2 \frac{3}{4} \times 2 \frac{3}{8} \times 5 \frac{1}{8}$  inches, making them just the right size for a child between 18 and 24 months old. At the mouth of the moccasins, tanned-leather peeks out from an otherwise white-beaded shoe, surrounding the ankle with a soft hide and offering two laces to tighten up the shoe on the wearer's foot. On both of the moccasins are eight beaded deer-like creatures embedded into the white-beaded background. All eight deer face forward towards the toes, and those in the bottom register are made to look as if they are standing along red soil. One of these proud animals is depicted in a bright red bead while the rest are black. On the top of the vamp is a proud and mighty Thunderbird, roughly the same size as the deer. The figure of the Thunderbird seems to be intended to face the wearer, perhaps indicating a sense of engagement between the symbol and the child. To those admiring the moccasins, whether in the glass case they are displayed in at the Metropolitan Museum or otherwise, the sacred symbol is upside down. Perhaps the most beautiful, yet puzzling, aspect about these ornamented moccasins is the additional beadwork that fully encompasses the soles of the shoes: displaying a large red Thunderbird symbol on a blue-beaded background. This calls into question the intended functionality of the Moccasins. Were these *Child's Moccasins* meant for use? If not, what were they intended for? By asking questions of intention and use, we might begin to see the shadows of a community responsible for the *Child's Moccasins* behind the glass.

Glass beads, originally called Pony Beads, were not introduced to Plains Nations, like the

Cheyenne, until 1675 by French fur traders.<sup>1</sup> By 1840, Pony beads were replaced by smaller and less expensive Seed beads and became highly sought after by Plains women.<sup>2</sup> With the introduction of Seed beads, beaded embroidery became easier and more accessible to work with, “enabling women to cover entire surfaces of clothing, bags, and cradles with intricate beaded designs.”<sup>3</sup> Children’s clothing and objects were especially significant works, as they were often made by a mother and/or female relatives and expressed the joy and excitement that came with the birth of a child.<sup>4</sup> Fully beaded clothing was often saved for ceremonial use as it would be uncomfortable to wear and would not last if frequently worn. These outfits and objects could be so elaborate that they took weeks, if not months, to create.<sup>5</sup> Works made for children symbolized the love and care of their family members, especially given that these objects would be quickly outgrown by a healthy child despite all the labor involved in making them.<sup>6</sup> Many of these objects were so cherished by family members that they would be passed down generationally and used many times over, making the elaborately detailed *Child’s Moccasins* a slightly disturbing sight to see in a cold glass case.<sup>7</sup> While these objects absolutely stand on their own as masterpieces, they are also much more than simply works of art to be collected and displayed. The *Child’s Moccasins* hold within them the echoes of community, only to be silenced by the glass they sit behind.

At the symposium *Resisting, Reclaiming, Reframing: Indigenous Communities and Art Museum Collections*, artist Teri Greeves emphasized that the Native objects seen in museum collections were, and are, meant to be used and worn, not put behind glass to be observed.<sup>8</sup> Greeves told the story of her encounter with museum storage and the hundreds, if not thousands, of indigenous items locked away in sealed units, away from the public and away from their related communities.<sup>9</sup> When Teri Greeves encountered rows upon rows of moccasins on one of

her visits, she said, she “could not help but think of the imprint that must be found inside:” the imprint of a foot that showed continual wear; the same type of imprint Greeves found within her own mother’s favorite pair of leggings that she had asked to be burned in.<sup>10</sup> For Greeves, this was not just the footprint of a person. It was an impression of the care that goes into making clothing for a loved one: an impression of the life of the person who used them. The footprints Greeves spoke of are echoes of repetition and action—echoes of power and agency that diminish over time by displaying them in a glass case, or worse, simply tucking them away in storage. Greeves implores visitors to look closer, and more critically, at these objects and ask themselves if they can see the impressions of a community behind the glass display. Are there footprints inside the displayed *Child’s Moccasins*?

The presence of the Thunderbird, a sacred symbol in Plains cultures, is often associated with protection. Whatever the intended use of the moccasins in question, the significance of the Thunderbird symbol, coupled with the exquisite beadwork, should imply to viewers the level of care that went into the artists’ creation. The beaded soles of the moccasins seem to contradict any sort of functionality, for constant pressure on the glass beads from walking—especially from the clumsiness of young children just learning to walk—would wear away at the intricate designs and possibly unravel the beadwork. The well-preserved nature of the *Moccasins* tells us that these shoes were likely not used for long periods of time, if at all. This does not mean, however, that these moccasins were not made for use, as some have suggested.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps they were ceremonial, like many intricately beaded outfits and objects were, and therefore not used often enough to show signs of wear. Perhaps the child for whom the shoes were made did not yet know how to walk. Similarly important to consider, however, is that many elaborately beaded objects were traded or sold by Native artists in order to sustain their livelihoods, a practice that

was especially prevalent in the 19th century.<sup>12</sup> By creating an object for trade using the skills and care traditionally set aside for the creation of goods for one's family, the practice of beading embodies a community craft that far supersedes the beauty of just one pair of moccasins.

Whatever the intended use of the *Moccasins*, it is clear through the intricate and careful beadwork, as well as the figural motifs, that these moccasins were made by someone who cared very deeply for their craft. Considering that figural motifs were included on children's clothing and objects in order to provide "spiritual protection and promote a long, healthy life," the Thunderbird, coupled with the plentiful deer, may suggest intentions of abundance and protection for the receiver of these moccasins.<sup>13</sup>

We do not know whether these moccasins were originally made for use or for trade. As with many indigenous objects and artworks that have been collected by Euro-Americans, a thorough provenance history does not exist and only leaves room for speculation. The *Art of Native America* exhibition, incorporated into the Met's American Wing, intentionally situates indigenous art histories alongside that of Euro-American art histories, something which has been deafeningly lacking in Western museums for centuries. *Art of Native America* is only one step towards fully engaging with the problematic presence of Native objects in Western museums. Even so, by displaying these works with little background or explanation, visitors are left without seeing the communities or presence of the artists behind these works. While the *Child's Moccasins* can, and should, be appreciated for their remarkable artistry, they are, more importantly, part of a longstanding generational craft that only adds to artistic tradition. It is necessary to ask non-Native viewers to see the generational care and wisdom that went into each object's creation, like the *Child's Moccasins*, illuminating crucial concepts and histories within indigenous cultures. The expertise visible in the beadwork of the moccasins alludes to the

generations of beadworkers behind the hands that created them. The repetitive action of sewing each Seed bead into place should remind viewers of the repetition that went into the use and wear of these objects now found behind the glass. Seeing the *Child's Moccasins* displayed, alone and with one lying on its side as if just thrown off by the child who might have worn them, it is possible to see the presence of the people behind these objects in the footprints they leave behind.

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# Endnotes

1. Rosoff, 29.
2. Rosoff, 29.
3. Rosoff, 29.
4. Burke, 179.
5. Burke, 179.
6. Burke, 179.
7. Rosoff, 29.
8. Quoting the public lecture Teri Greeves gave at *Resisting, Reclaiming, Reframing: Indigenous Communities and Art Museum Collections* on Friday, March 8th, 2019 at Columbia University.
9. Quoting the public lecture Teri Greeves gave at *Resisting, Reclaiming, Reframing: Indigenous Communities and Art Museum Collections* on Friday, March 8th, 2019 at Columbia University.
10. Greeves, *Resisting, Reclaiming, Reframing: Indigenous Communities and Art Museum Collections*
11. Here I am particularly alluding to a common misconception that moccasins with beaded soles are considered to be “burial moccasins.” For more information see Joe Horse Capture, “Hood Museum: Plains: Clothing & Regalia,” November 2017.
12. Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxanne, 7.
13. Burke, 173. Interestingly, though beadwork is typically done by women in most Plains Native American Tribes, figural work is typically delegated to men, showing the possibility of a break from gender norms. This break from traditional gender roles was not prevalent until the early twentieth century; however, it does manifest in some Plains beadwork from the mid to late nineteenth century.