LIST OF CONTENTS

PART I
Introduction

Introducing native American art
The traditional viewpoint; materials and tools; past and present responses; function and meaning

PART 2
Suggested classroom activities
(for these activities the images in Part 3 should be printed out)

Getting to know the objects
Points for discussion; using Venn diagrams; working in pairs and groups; problem solving as an approach

Discussion for older pupils
Status and power; recording history; myths and legends; curing rituals

Practical art activities
Personal adornment and masks; build a group totem pole; make a concertina book; try some beadwork; depict an animal; design a Tlingit blanket; sculpt with papier-mâché

Time Line

PART 3
Looking at the images

North America
Leggings, Apache
Headdress, Sioux
Pipe bowl, Sioux
Medicine bag, Ojibway
Whirling logs, Navaho
The Raven and the First Men, Haida
Haida memorial pole
Frontlet, Niska
Ivory miniatures, Inuit
Shaman’s rattle, Haida
Spindle whorl, Salish
Powhatan’s mantle, Algonquin
Button blanket, Tsimshian
Tlingit (Chilkat) blanket

Central America
Codex Laud, Mixtec
Skeleton Angel and Devil, Mexico
Turquoise ornament, Mixtec-Aztec
Necklace, Panama
Rock crystal skull, Aztec
Mendoza Codex, Mexico
Yaxchilan lintel, Maya

South America
Poncho, Inca
Pre-Inca pot, Moche
Llama effigy, Peru
Gold alloy figure, Colombia

Map

For easy navigation blue signals a link to a relevant page. Click to follow the link.

Top right of every page is a link returning to the LIST OF CONTENTS page.

Click here for a full list of Goodwill Art titles.
INTRODUCTION

When the New World was ‘discovered’ in 1492, there existed throughout the Americas — from the Arctic to Cape Horn — cultures and societies evolved over thousands of years. It is estimated that in the 15th century perhaps 100 million people occupied this vast long continent, whose unifying physical feature is the mountain chain stretching from Alaska through the Rockies of the Mid-West and Sierras of Mexico to the Andes of Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Chile.

The lifestyle of these original Americans ranged from hunter-gatherers such as the Inuit (Eskimos) in the far north, Iroquois farming societies of the north east and Cherokee small town peoples of the south, to some of the most complex and highly civilised empires the world has ever seen — notably the Aztec and Maya in Central or Mesoamerica and the Inca in South America.

These peoples created art and artefacts as diverse as the environments in which they lived. Contact with Europeans soon tragically led, however (with few exceptions), to their decimation — through disease and conquest — and to the disappearance of their cultures. Only in recent decades has a strong interest in Native North American art been rekindled.

Western history marvels at Aztec and Mayan art and architecture, and 14,000 miles of paved Inca roads. Today, the ‘Indians’ natural understanding of the environment is also admired, and 6 million Mayan and 12 million Inca speakers can be ever prouder of their roots.

While it is impossible to generalise about the style, function and technique of the art of each region, for the sake of clarity the images are divided into three geographical areas — North America, Central America and South America.
Introducing native American art

The traditional viewpoint
When applying the word ‘art’ to items in this selection it is important not to think about it in the western aesthetic sense. In most American Indian languages no word for art as an independent concept exists. The idea of separating art from daily life is alien in traditional cultures.

Despite the huge regional diversity represented here, there is a spiritual unity in the function and purpose of these objects and images. They can be seen as a powerful expression of the beliefs, mythology, history and social organisation of the people who made and used them. At the same time they allow insight into the strong relationship between these cultures and the natural world.

Materials and tools
Unsurprisingly, native American artefacts and art objects, and the tools used to produce them, are generally made from the natural materials most readily available. The Northwest Coast of North America is an extensive area of dense woodland, where objects made of wood and wood products predominate. The memorial pole and shaman’s rattle are good examples. Buffalo hides and deer skin provided the leather worked by Plains Indians, while many tools and objects of whale and walrus ivory were made by the Inuit.

However, the use of a particular material is not always an indication of where an object originated. Early trading patterns and changing availability meant that materials were transported, especially if they were rare and prized because of the prestige their ownership brought. Sea shells can be found as decoration on ritual objects made in inland areas, such as the Ojibway medicine bag. In South America, gold objects like the Muisca figure, being small and portable, were often traded far and wide across a region.

Once Europeans settled in the Americas they introduced new materials, many of which gradually replaced traditional ones. Often these proved easier to use and better suited to their purpose. Perhaps the best example is that of glass beads replacing porcupine or bird quills for decoration on leatherwork. These have been incorporated into traditional artefacts such as the Apache leggings or the duct flute necklace.

Glass beads made in Europe were adopted widely across North America, where they were originally given as gifts by the European settlers and later traded for furs. Using beads eliminated the time-consuming process of preparing and applying the quills. They were also more colourful and easier to use for spiral and curved designs. Thus the introduction of a new material affected the design and style of a long-established craft.

The importance of ornamentation
Mayan artefacts, especially pottery, were often highly decorated as in the detail shown here, taken from a Mayan painted vase. The seated woman wears similar elaborate bloodletting headdress and rich textiles as the 7th-century Lady Xoc. Bloodletting was a crucial part of Mayan ritual, closely associated with their belief in the spiritual world and undertaken by all members of society.
Part 3 — **Looking at the images**