THE COURTING FLUTE IN
NATIVE AMERICAN TRADITION

Ed Wapp, Jr.

"I was one part of a red cedar standing high on a
high mountain.
I was taken by a young man, whittled, and given a
sweet voice.
I became the night voice of the young man speak­
ing to his sweetheart,
Singing his tender thoughts."

The Courting Flute is one of the three melody
instruments used by Native American people and is
an integral part of traditional Indian music. Among
Native Americans, the voice is also regarded as a
melody instrument. The Apache violin completes the
trio of Indian melody instruments. Rarely are the
three instruments used ensemble.

Used principally by Woodlands tribes, Southwestern
tribes and tribes from the Southern and Northern
Plains, the Indian flute was once a means of trans­
mitting signals in the night. The flute, however, was
most frequently used as a means by which a young
man could communicate his love.

Flutes are made from red cedar, redwood or pine,
but gun barrels and other materials are finding their
way to the skillful hands of the flute craftsman-
musician. Flutes are frequently decorated with small
carved animals, quillwork, beadwork, leather stream­
ers and feathers.

Melodies for the flute are both traditional and
contemporary. Traditional melodies are transcribed
and transposed from the love songs, riding songs and
dance-related songs that are historically part of the
songs and song systems of many Native American
communities. Individuals also compose pieces es­
pecially for the flute and the composed songs are
frequently based in the contemporary experiences
of a tribe or the composer.

The flute tradition among Native American peo­
ple is not a static form. New materials for crafting
flutes are being used by flute musicians and ex­
panded needs are represented in broadened flute repertories. Like any dynamic, expressive cultural
tradition, changing times and lifeways are reflected
in the ways groups of people maintain or alter the
parts of their lives that represent an historic sense of
community, and for the moment, few young Indian
people are learning the art of crafting and playing
the Indian Courting Flute.

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ARTWORK OF THE
NORTHERN PLAINS INDIANS

Tom Kavanagh

The artwork of Northern Plains Indian Tribes reflects both the ecological and cultural environments
in which the Northern Plains Indians live.

Materials used, such as buffalo, deer, and elk hides, deertail hair and porcupine quills and earth
color paints, were what was available. Artwork was applied to every utilitarian and ceremonial article
that could be decorated.

Traditional artistic expression was not formalized into ‘art for art’s sake,’ but developed from esthetic
origins of a more functional nature. It is difficult, if
not impossible, to separate a piece of Indian artwork
from its cultural environment. Such work can be
admired for its technical complexity and its mastery
of the media. However, it cannot be fully appre­
ciated without a knowledge of the culture that
produced it.

The horse-pastoralist-buffalo hunting economy of
the Plains required that the Indian camps move every
week or ten days in order to find sufficient grazing
land for the horse herd, which might number close
to 2000 horses for a single camp. Camp equipment
and home furnishings were limited to those things
which were essential to this nomadic way of life and
were easily portable. But within these limitations,