

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 speaking 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 transmitting 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 streamers 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 especially 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 people is not a static form. New materials for crafting flutes are being used by flute musicians and expanded needs are represented in broadened flute repertoires. 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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Pour Elk, a Sioux dandy, shows the examples of Lazy Stitch, overlay, and quillwork designs of the 1880's. BAE photo.

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 appreciated 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,

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