

Gorgets Offer Insight into Early Chickasaw Culture

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3/21/2014

ADA, OKLAHOMA — For centuries, Chickasaws have been known for their sense of style and panache. The 18th century English author James Adair noted although Chickasaws wore simple clothing, they adorned themselves with intricate body art and striking jewelry for special occasions and ceremonies. Necklaces and throat collars hold a special place in the heart of the Chickasaw people.

They are known as gorgets, (pronounced gôr-jèt), a French word meaning “throat” or “of the throat.”

Like their European counterparts, gorgets were worn by early Chickasaws as a symbol of rank and status. Different gorgets were worn for different events. For everyday attire, simple gourd or stone gorgets were worn. For special occasions or religious ceremonies, a person would wear their finest regalia.

“Gorgets told a lot about a person,” said Chickasaw artist Dustin Mater. “They told a lot about a person’s status. Most wore common gourd necklaces. Shell necklaces, especially ocean shells, and copper were reserved for high ranking people.”

European explorers of the 18th century took notice of gourd necklaces worn by the Chickasaw people. Gourds were an inexpensive way to adorn the body.

Early Chickasaw gorgets were made from nature. Gorgets came in many shapes and sizes. Gourds, fresh water shells, ocean shells, mollusks, stone and copper were used to make gorgets. They have been carved from these materials for thousands of years by the tribes living on and near the Mississippi River.

The materials used and motifs depicted on the gorget reflected a person’s status within the tribe. The most desired gorget was made of difficult-to-find material. Ocean shells and copper, which required trading with other tribes to obtain, were prized among the Chickasaw. Only the most influential tribal members wore a gorget made from these.

The etching on the surface of a gorget was not merely ornamental. Some motifs were gender specific while others were used to relate family ties. Designs often explained important fables, tales and stories of the Chickasaw.

“There are a couple of designs that were unique to women. They have a Janice-like quality to them,” Mater said. “They depict woodpeckers, a symbol of the protector, and turkeys engraved on them facing each other between a striped pole. Other symbols communicated family relations. The more you learn about gorgets, the more you understand the complex story of each piece.”

Like pottery, ancient gorgets follow a culture’s influence through time.

“Gorgets have been made for thousands of years and are a good archive for the pre-contact era,” Mater said. “You can see the dress, stories and iconography we had before European influence. They are a real treasure trove. There are all these mysteries within gorgets we are slowly tapping into.”



A gorget by Chickasaw artist Dustin Mater made of abalone shell, glass beads and turquoise.

“There were all kinds of commerce and trade between the early Muskogean empires,” Mater said. “Mound builders ranged from the Gulf of Mexico all the way up to Toronto, Canada; wherever there were waterways of the Mississippi. Tribes shared a lot of the same iconography. The influence of the mound builders can be found all over the eastern United States. There are many repeating patterns on pottery and gorgets.”

Today, most associate gorgets as metal, crescent-shaped necklaces. This style of necklace was brought to the Native Americans by Europeans. European gorgets were worn by military officers — or men of authority — to distinguish rank. Southeastern tribes quickly began to adorn themselves with the fashionable European gorget. They, too, wore necklaces to symbolize status and rank.

Still uniquely Chickasaw, artwork adorning metal gorgets worn after contact with Europeans took a European style and flavor. For Chickasaws, wearing gourd and shell gorgets fell out of popular favor for metals. Gold, steel, and silver were traded materials popular to make gorgets. The woodpecker and the four directions are among the traditional motifs that adorned the new style of gorgets and survived the transition of what was thought of as the contemporary of the time.

“Once European metals and silver were traded among the tribes, gorgets drastically changed,” Mater said. “One of the great abilities of the Southeastern tribes is to adapt and change quickly. You were a real somebody if you had a big metal gorget.”

Chickasaw gorgets have seen resurgence in the last 20 years. Contemporary gorgets blend new designs with traditional themes. Today’s Chickasaw artists, such as Mater, create their own unique art inspired by their ancestors.

Mater is a self-professed fan of shell gorgets. For more than five years, he has devoted himself to researching the motifs etched on pre-European contact pieces; incorporating them into modern gorget shell carvings.

“I am drawn to the Southeastern Indian art,” he said. “It is so geometric iconographic. There is nothing like it. There is a Renaissance among Southeastern artists. They are saying ‘hey, this is our birthright; it is our well.’ There is such diversity with gorgets. There could be a hundred people, a thousand people, and no one is going to do it exactly the same.”