



DECEMBER 2020

# ADORNMENT AND IDENTITY

## Boy's Vest | Unidentified Lakota artist



Unidentified Lakota artist (United States). *Boy's Vest*. Late 19th century. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Mrs. Richard W. Case, Sparks, Maryland, BMA 1985.162

Though this vest—designed for a boy—is small, it is rich with beadwork designs in red, white, blue, and green against a background of clear glass beads on leather. The edges are rimmed with a red band, interspersed regularly with two white lines. Aligned next to this red band, on the edges closest to the closure with three sets of narrow leather ties, is a vertical green design. On the shoulders are identical decorative motifs—red with outlines in white, and blue triangular designs. At the bottom of the vest on both sides are two multicolored inverted triangles with four vertical red lines emerging from the top. On both sides of the vest's chest area is a design of two American flags, back-to-back.

This vest, with its elaborate beadwork, was made in the late 19th century by women of the Lakota people. In the late 1800s, the U.S. Government forcibly restricted the Lakota to a reservation in North and South Dakota, prohibiting them from moving freely around the plains or hunting buffalo. At this time, the U.S. Government passed the Code of Indian Offences which banned the Lakota language and cultural practices such as the ceremonial Sun Dance.

This repressive law, and the scrutiny of white reservation agents, forced the Lakota people to find ways to protect their cultural heritage while outwardly attempting to demonstrate that they accepted being “American” as defined by the U.S. Government. An example of this was Lakota celebrations of the Fourth of July, which gave them the opportunity to engage in normally prohibited activities such as dances, puberty celebrations, and “giveaways” to provide goods to those in need.

Beadwork is an iconic Lakota art form that has its origins in quillwork—the use of porcupine quills to create geometric designs on items. Including the American flags on beaded garments for children, like the vest featured in this resource, bonnets, or cowboy boots—which were typically attire worn by white settlers—allowed Lakota mothers to assert an American identity for their children while protecting them from unwanted negative scrutiny regarding their culture. These exquisitely beaded items of clothing were also a way for mothers to lavish attention upon and express love for their children.

### CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Show students images of the *Boy's Vest* and ask them to describe what they see. As students make observations, share relevant information about the garment. Divide students into groups of four and ask them to discuss what they found most surprising or interesting about the work in its context. Have students share their responses with the entire class. You may also ask students to do additional research on the history and current issues of the Lakota people.



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### *Boy's Vest*

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