
Plains Region

Images of Plains and Plateau tribes have changed because of the bitter “Indian Wars” which took place during the second half of the 19th century. Many Native communities fought U.S. efforts to put a stop to Indian control of tribal lands. This conflict took over the nation’s newspapers and magazines at the beginning of the media age. For many people, the Plains warrior remains the traditional American Indian. The Indians of the Plains and Plateau have always valued courage in war. During the second half of the 19th century, the Omaha Dance, which honors the actions of warriors, spread from the Omaha Nation to other tribes on the Plains. These societies, however, have also always been connected by social, cultural, diplomatic, and trade relations. Living on a widespread prairie that supported huge herds of buffalo, elk, and deer, supports how native peoples honored and greatly valued the Creator and the natural world that supported their lives.

Pacific Northwest Region

For more than 10,000 years, Native peoples of the Northwest Coast have further developed their communities through trade. From Yakutat Bay in Alaska to the Columbia River in Washington state, Native fishermen and sea hunters traveled by water and over mountains to trade goods such as fish oil, dentalium shells, copper, and mountain goat wool. Due to such great natural resources, this economy allowed Northwest Coast peoples to develop comfortable and sophisticated societies based on social ranking, elaborate ceremonial life, and spectacular art created to celebrate the history and reputation of families, clans, and lineages. At feasts the status of leading families was confirmed by their generosity to their guests. Through luxurious gifts—including, eventually, non-Native trade goods—communities shared their wealth and maintained social balance.

Adapted from: Infinity of Nations – Art and History in the Collections of the National Museum of the American Indian

Woodlands Region

The history of the Woodlands—the United States and southern Canada (east of the Mississippi River and along the shores of the Great Lakes)—spans a remarkable length of time. The long-distance trade that took place among peoples in the eastern Woodlands 6,000 to 1,000 years ago is some of the most outstanding examples of regional trading in all of Native North America. For example, bannerstones (spear-throwers used to make it possible to throw spears farther)—are often found great distances from where the stone was originated in the ground. The incredible spread and use of these bannerstones shows that Native peoples crossed long distances from a very early date.

Between AD 900 and 1600, complicated chiefdoms—large platform mounds and open plazas—came from the South. Chiefdoms' large population centers were supported by corn agriculture. Their societies, later named Mississippian, were very strict. Not only did these societies control long-distance trade, leaders controlled the exchange of knowledge beyond, as well as within, the Southeast. The shared symbolism on art found at Mississippian and other ancient sites speaks to the sweeping knowledge throughout the Woodlands and farther west.

Southwest Region

In the American Southwest, Pueblo peoples tell of their ancestors' journeys through the region's canyons and mesas (isolated flat-top hills with steep sides). Ancient stories connect the present-day Pueblo peoples to their roots and ancestral lands, where Native people built and rebuilt stone or adobe dwellings, often lived there for hundreds of years, and then moved on. The beginnings of Pueblo pottery traditions can also be seen in materials found at Mesa Verde (AD 600–1300), well-known for its spectacular cliff dwellings. Other ancestral Pueblo peoples built large, multi-storied masonry buildings, the most impressive of which is Pueblo Bonito.

Regional centers began to spread throughout the Southwest. The first was the large site of villages and irrigation canals known as Hohokam (AD 200–1400), a culture regarded as ancestral by the Akimel O'odham and Tohono O'odham of Arizona. Farther south, Casas Grandes, with its ritual and trading center Paquimé, grew rapidly from AD 1200 to 1450. Macaw parrots are native to the tropical lowlands of southern Mexico. These parrots were bred at Paquimé, which is where the precious-feather trade began during the 14th and 15th centuries. Many shell beads were found at Grand Gulch. The beads provide evidence that ancestral Pueblo peoples had connections with the coast of Southern California very early on. Hohokam ball courts and cacao were found on pottery from Pueblo Bonito and represent rituals shared between Mesoamerica and the Southwest.
