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Sioux Pipe Bowl, ca. 1860

This pipe bowl is unusual in the circular shape of its bowl; T-shaped bowls were more commonly found among Plains Indians. A bird image is carved on both sides, one image in profile and the other a frontal view. Their abstract representation makes it difficult to ascertain exactly which bird is depicted, but two choices present themselves—the eagle or the thunderbird. The eagle was considered sacred because of its connection with the sun and because it represented the Creator. The thunderbird was a mythical creature thought responsible for the thunder, lightning, and rain. Depiction of either bird would have been appropriate on a pipe bowl. The making of a pipe bowl is a religious act since the bowl is considered to represent Mother Earth while the stem was the connecting link with the spiritual realm.

A pipe has two components: the stem, made from ash or sumac, and the bowl, which was most commonly made from pipestone, or catlinite. Catlinite was the stone favored by Native Americans in the creation of pipe bowls, and it is named after George Catlin, who was the first to describe it following his visit to a quarry in the 1830s.

Long before the arrival of Europeans, Native Americans traveled hundreds of miles to obtain catlinite for their pipes. Some groups possessed a myth that views the red stone as the symbolic flesh and blood of their ancestors, which gave catlinite an aura of sacredness commanding deep reverence. Catlinite quarries in present-day Minnesota are considered sacred ground.

It is an ancient practice of Native Americans to use tobacco and pipes as a way to connect with the spiritual realm. Beginning around 1000 BC, the people of the Adena culture built great mounds in the Ohio Valley and produced carved stone pipes. From about 300 BC to AD 500, artists of the Hopewell tradition sculpted naturalistic figures in clay and on stone pipes. Excavations at the great Mound Builder complex at Spiro, Oklahoma, which flourished between AD 1000 and 1500, yielded many examples of stone effigy pipes.

It was not uncommon to find elaborate pipes that were four to five feet long, adorned with hawk feathers, fur, horsehair, quills, inlays, and carvings that represent animal figures from the spirit world. Such pipes were rarely meant to be smoked, but they still carried strong spiritual powers. Sacred pipes were said to possess the power to enforce peace and were therefore recognized as symbols of truce and used as passports for safe conduct. Among the Sioux a sacred pipe cemented bonds of kinship between non-relatives. Very few ceremonial occasions were held without being solemnized by the smoking of a pipe. Even the simplest ritual was surrounded by acts of respect; one of the most common was when a smoker lit his pipe and said six prayers while offering his pipe to the sky, earth, and the six directions as signs of respect to his world.

The sacred pipe is often referred to as the “peace pipe” since, to the Europeans, it came to symbolize the finalization of any treaty or concord. The parties would all smoke the pipe that, in Native American tradition, bound the parties in a sacred union to honor the decisions made. In addition to its role in peacemaking, a sacred pipe was used when greeting new arrivals, in agreeing on an upcoming battle, warding off evil spirits, healing the sick, and for a successful hunt or harvest.

The tobacco, too, was believed to have mystical powers, coming as it did from Mother Earth. The rising smoke was a physical sign of the connection between the human and spirit worlds.

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