

Kiowa Cradle ca. 1860

In the days before car seats and playpens, Indian babies were carried in cradles strapped onto their mothers' backs. A carrying strap was fastened to the frame and placed across the mother's chest. The strap could also be draped over a saddle horn for safe transportation of the baby by horseback, or the mother could hang it over a tree limb to keep the baby out of harm's way while she worked nearby. Or the cradle could simply be propped up in the tipi. Such cradles protected the baby from danger while allowing the mother freedom to work and travel. Indian toys were often simply miniatures of adult tools, so it was common for young girls to play with tiny cradleboards as they practiced the art of motherhood with their dolls.

A cradle was a utility item that was not only a safe haven for baby, but a work of art as well. The designs of cradleboards ran the gamut from beautifully elaborate and fully beaded to very simply constructed and decorated. Some of the most beautiful examples of Indian art are found on decorated cradles, whose elaborate beadwork told stories of parents' dreams for their children. The designs on this cradle demonstrate the perfect symmetry that is integral to the Plains Indian aesthetic, but the distinguishing features of this cradle are the use of starkly contrasting colors of deep red and blue for the background and the subtle changes in the size of the diamond and oval motifs. The top of the support boards continue the symmetry with a painted arrow motif outlined with pierced holes, giving texture and color to the otherwise plain wood. Cradles were usually made by a grandmother or aunt, or passed down from a family member. The creation of a cradle was a ceremonial act, and decorations such as quillwork, beadwork, and other treasures conferred esteem on the family. The frame was usually made from willow with buckskin as the most common covering, but flour sacks, heavy canvas, and other types of cloth were used later. Among some groups, cradles were made specifically for each new baby and remained his/her property. In other tribes, cradles were passed from child to child within the family.

Cradles varied in construction and form, depending on the tribe and individual maker, as can be seen from the variety in the Warnock Collection. Most cradleboards carried an umbilical cord amulet for the infant to carry through life as a connection between past and future. Traditionally, the top of the cradle represented the baby's brain; a red-beaded line, which is often found encircling the top, symbolized the baby's life path.

Materials used for frame construction varied among tribes and locations. Rawhide or thick leather was generally used for the bed part of cradles, with soft fur covering the bed. Trade cloth was often used for lining the inside of the cradle and for edge trim. Leather was used for the outer covering, and a leather thong laced the baby securely into the cradle. Cradles were decorated with strings of beads, beaded pouches, etc., to keep the baby entertained. It was said that a good cradleboard was equal in value to a good horse, a highly valued possessions in traditional Indian cultures.

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