

WC 9311002
Courting Whistle
Teton Sioux, c. 1885.

A whistle made of ash wood, length 26.75 inches, 68 cm., with the head of a long-billed bird at the distal end. The larger part of the whistle is wrapped in porcupine quills.

Ex-collection Marvin Lince, Tualatin, Oregon.

Courting flutes and whistles were used by young Sioux men to make girls aware of their presence and amorous desires. In the evening, their serenades were often heard around the camps. In contrast to the whistle, the five or more finger holes on a flute produced a range of tones. Their melodies as well as the sharp single note made by the whistle were believed to have magical influence over women. The whistles were also carried in the popular Grass dances, where fine dances were admired by the female spectators.

The elk heads carved on these flutes, and the bird heads carved on the whistles reminded the people of certain behavior of these animals and birds, behavior that was interpreted in amorous or erotic terms.

The long-billed bird on the whistles represents the Sandhill Crane, called "brown crane" by the Sioux. It derived its erotic symbolism from the perceived resemblance between the crane's retractable long neck and the similar capacity of the human penis.

Bird heads with long bills are most frequently noticed on whistles dating back to the early nineteenth century. Those carved in the grass dances since the 1860s were carved with shorter, less fragile bills. The example discussed here documents the sporadic survival of the older style up to the 1880s. Courting flutes are still being made by some Indian specialists, but carvings with erotic connotations are no longer fashionable.

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Literature:

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