



## Native American Art

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Before the European conquest, many North American Indian tribes recognized more than two genders. In fact, mixed genders were one of the most widespread and distinctive features of Native American societies. Those individuals who combined the behavior, dress, and social roles of males and females were considered distinct from either sex.

Mixed-gender individuals who were biologically male have been documented in over 155 of the estimated 400 tribes in North America at the time of European contact. In approximately fifty of these groups, a formal status also existed for females who undertook a male lifestyle.

Since Native American worldviews emphasize and appreciate transformation and change, gender alteration was considered natural. Individuals were encouraged to live their lives in the gender role(s) that best suited them.

Sometimes, particularly among the American Indians of the Great Plains, visions or dreams were considered powerful and life defining and were responsible for gender change. Some individuals altered their genders several times during the course of their lives.

### **Cross-Dressing**

The most visible marker of mixed-gender status among North American Indians was some form of cross-dressing. In some tribes, biological males of mixed-gender dressed distinctly from both men and women. In other cases, they only partially cross-dressed, or not at all.

Cross-dressing varied even more for biological females. They often only wore men's clothing when hunting or in battle. (Warrior women were not necessarily mixed-gender individuals. Most Plains tribes had women warriors who accompanied war parties on certain occasions, for example, if they were avenging the death of a family member.)

It should be noted that the term "cross-dressing" does not adequately describe the pre-contact Native American practice whereby men and women donned the clothing of the opposite sex. Since it was possible for men and women in many of these societies to become social females and males, respectively, those who dressed in the clothing of the opposite sex were not actually cross-dressing.

### **Sexual and Emotional Relations**

Mixed-gender Native Americans typically formed sexual and emotional relations with members of their own biological sex. Since it was possible for them to change their gender, their relationships were not homosexual as defined in contemporary Western terms.

In addition, Native Americans typically believed that individuals possessed a gender identity, but not a

corresponding sexual identity.

Some mixed-gender individuals who were biological males had relationships with women, although in most cases these were men who were already warriors and husbands and who altered their gender because of a vision or dream. Interestingly, mixed-gender individuals never had relationships with one another.

The mixed-gender role in certain Native American tribes provided an opportunity for women to assume the male role permanently and to marry women. Among the Mohave of Colorado, a girl who exhibited interest in male activities could choose at puberty to dress her hair in the male style and have her nose pierced like the men, instead of receiving a chin tattoo like other women.

In turn, the Mohave publicly acknowledged the status of the mixed-gender girl. They performed an initiation ceremony that recognized her identity as a social male, after which she assumed a male name and was granted the marriage rites of a male. These public rites validated her mixed-gender identity and signified to the community that she was to be treated as a man.

### **Artistic Depictions of Mixed-Gender Individuals**

Mixed-gender individuals were depicted in a variety of North American Indian art forms. Artists of the Great Plains documented them on clothing and ledger drawings. In one particular drawing (1889), a Cheyenne artist presents a female in battle wearing a man's breechcloth and holding a gun in her hand.

In a tempera on bristol work titled *Berdache* (1987), Cherokee artist Joe Lawrence Lembo depicts an individual who simultaneously possesses male and female traits. Lembo divides the figure in half; male garments (a loincloth) clothe the proper left side while female attire (a dress) covers the proper right side. Similarly, the hairstyle is divided by gender, and the figure wears an earring only in the proper right ear.

*Berdache* reveals the social and economic impact that mixed-gender individuals had on the community. Since women tended the crops, the figure's proper right hand holds ears of corn. The proper left hand grasps a bow and arrow because men killed game for food.

Mixed-gender individuals either fulfilled the duties of the opposite sex or blended the responsibilities of both sexes. He or she, then, embodied the interdependent nature of male and female roles and, by extension, the positive, cohesive aspects of the entire community.

### **The Status of Mixed-Gender Individuals**

Since mixed-gender individuals frequently undertook the work duties of both sexes, they had a greater opportunity for personal and material gain than individuals who lived their lives in the role of a single gender. Some tribes, including the Navajo of the Southwest, granted mixed-gender individuals an elevated political and social status.

Many North American Indians believed that mixed-gender individuals contained both a male and a female inner spirit. The Sioux of the Great Plains, for example, thought that sometimes, when a woman was going to have twins, the two babies formed into one, into a half man-half woman being who was not a hermaphrodite.

### **Transformation and Special Powers**

Mixed-gender men and women also embodied transformation, an important component of most Native American belief systems. Lembo's painting *Berdache* draws a parallel between the cycles of night and day (and, by extension, the seasons) and gender fluctuation. In his work, the moon is above the female side of the figure, and the sun is over the male side.

Mixed-gender individuals were often thought to have special powers. They sometimes held sacred positions, including shaman, healer, seer, and prophet. In addition, Native Americans often assigned the origins of gender diversity to the spirit world, which overruled biological sex.

As only one example, the Bella Coola, who reside in western Canada, have a god named Skheents who is biologically male and possesses an alternate gender. In pre-conquest times, individuals who exhibited a proclivity for shifting their gender were said to have been influenced by Skheents.

In mythology, Skheents is the first berry-picker, an honorable position since berries are an important seasonal food for the Bella Coola. Skheents guards a bevy of heavenly young maidens and is one of the village ancestors.

The Bella Coola make masks that represent Skheents and portray him in dances celebrating the berry harvest. During these performances, Skheents' face and voice are those of a woman, but he also possesses masculine characteristics.

### **Man-Woman Kachinas**

Among the people who resided in the pueblos of New Mexico and Arizona, man-woman kachinas, or gods, were portrayed in masked dances and ceremonies. Among the Hopi, one such kachina, called Hé-é-é, is known as the Warrior Maiden Kachina. Hé-é-é represents a warrior spirit and is described as either a man dressed in women's clothes or a woman using men's equipment, depending on the mesa where one hears the story.

At Second Mesa, the Hopi say that Hé-é-é represents a young man who was changing clothes with his bride in a cornfield. He was only half-dressed with his pants on under the dress, and with only one side of his hair in the style of a maiden (a whorl on each side of the head), when he saw enemies approaching. Grabbing his weapons, he fought them off until assistance arrived.

At Third Mesa, the Hopi describe Hé-é-é as a young maiden who has fixed only one side of her hair when enemies drew near. She grabbed her father's weapons and fought until help came.

Despite the variation of stories, Hé-é-é is consistently known as a powerful warrior. During one ceremony, the masked dancer who represents Hé-é-é leads a band of fearsome warrior kachinas that protect the ritual procession.

### **Mixed-Gendered Artists**

American Indians with mixed genders were not only depicted in art; they themselves produced artwork. Biological males often specialized in crafts, such as pottery, beadwork, and textile making, which typically were the pursuits of women. In many tribes, mixed-gender individuals were among the most productive and accomplished artists of their communities.

Some of them were so talented that their names were recorded and their works cataloged. The Navajo Hastiin Klah, for example, is well known for his tapestries. As only one other example of many, the Laguna Arroh-ah-och produced beautiful pottery in the late nineteenth century.

### **The European Impact**

Europeans impacted the lives of mixed-gender individuals when they arrived in North America. European attempts to suppress alternate-gender traditions ranged from the regulation of mixed-gender individuals in missions and boarding schools to their actual murder.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Native American attitudes toward sex and gender had been influenced by European values. No longer accepted and embraced, mixed-gender individuals frequently were disparaged.

Although alternate-gender traditions disappeared among some tribes, the institution went underground among others. In a few tribes it has continued to the present, and in others the tradition is being revived.

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