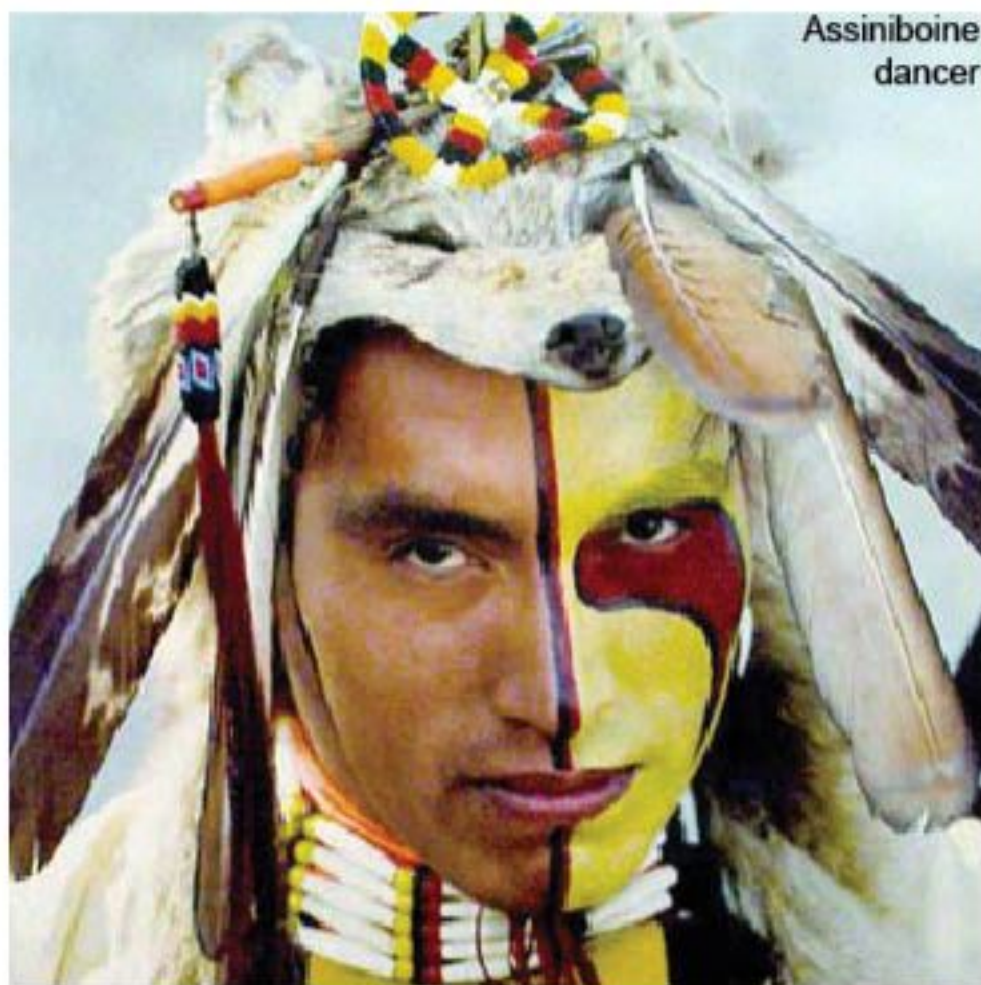


British Museum Introduces Native North American Indian Rituals

By: Karen Dabrowska

Two magnificent head dresses of eagle feathers greet visitors to the British Museum's Warriors of the Plains: 200 years of Native North American honour and ritual exhibition.



Assiniboine
dancer

Eagles were believed to draw their power from the sun's rays as symbolized by a crown of feathers. By wearing the features the warrior takes on the power of the creature to strike at prey swiftly and unexpectedly.

The focus of the exhibition is on the material culture of the Native North American Indians of the Plains between 1800 and the present, and the importance of the objects in a social and ceremonial

context.

The area inhabited by the plains Indians stretches from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains and from the Canadian plains to the Gulf of Mexico. Today the Blackfoot and Soux still live in groups bound by language and shared rituals . From the 1800s one of the most important units beyond the extended family was the warrior society, military by nature but also marked by a strong



**Buckskin shirt
and leggings**



Blackfoot warrior
headdress

sense of spirituality.

There was a rich ceremonial life which revolved round dances and rituals including drumming and prayers to the natural and spirit world's. The round shield worn on the back identified the owner by unique motifs which were often received through dreams or visions.

In the past warfare did not start and end with battle but extended into social life as well. Warriors purified themselves

before fighting and only fought if they experienced good omens such as dreams and visions.

During the 1900's the US government created reservations to enforce American culture on the plains Indians. That was when dances and ceremonies became a way of maintaining continuity with the past and preserving a community identity.

In the early 20th century the only way to gain honour on the battlefield was to join the army.

Returning soldiers are still celebrated with new versions of old ceremonies and charms continue to be worn for spiritual protection.

The Indians respected the animals and warriors sought their protection. A bundle of animal parts was taken on raids to ensure success.

Among the most memorable items on display are moccasins, stone headed clubs, beaded blanket strips, saddle bags and pipe tomahawks.

Each warrior nation had its own moccasins and experienced warriors could tell which tribe warriors belonged to by the footprints left by the moccasins. Stone headed clubs were used mostly in dances and parades and carried in diplomatic meetings. The beaded blanket strips symbolized the buffalo's spine and also the path of life.

Horses were brought to the plains by Spanish explorers in 1500. Owning a horse gave the warriors social status and great importance

HUMAN SCALP



Ledger drawing



was attached to saddle bags. The pipe tomahawks represented both war and peace and served as reminder of the delicate and changing nature of diplomatic relationships. The exhibition compliments the insight provided into Indian Culture

by a photo exhibition and video 'Aboriginal Participation and Sustainable Legacies' at the Canadian High Commission in London which highlights the unprecedented Aboriginal participation in the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver.