

# Traditional Native American Art

## Origins: Lesson 1



Kiowa  
Cradleboard  
by Vanessa Jennings

Cradleboards are as beautiful as they are important in Native families. For generations of Native people, the cradleboard provided safety and security for newborn babies. A family's love for a baby was visibly evident in the designs on the cradleboard. Many cradleboards were elaborately beaded with floral designs and geometric patterns that reflected elements of nature, including animals, the earth, sky, and astronomical symbols, all based on the family's original design concepts. The ornamentation was a symbol of the family's celebration of the baby's new life and their hope for a happy and healthy future for the child. No cradle was alike because families retained their own distinct designs and passed them down from generation to generation. Copying a design from another family was considered culturally unethical. Designs could be given to individuals outside the family however if a special relationship existed.

In many cultures, such as the Cheyenne, the baby's umbilical cord would be preserved and sewn into a small amulet, which would be attached to the cradleboard. Girls' navel amulets were beaded with turtle designs while boys' amulets would be decorated with lizard designs. Turtles and lizards are strong and live long lives, which the Cheyenne, as well as all Native families, wish for their children. Thus, the cradleboard was not only useful in transporting newborns, the cradleboard also represented the family's love, devotion, care, pride and prayers for their children, both present and future.

**Activity:** Design a cradleboard for a baby. Think about the designs you would like to add to the cradleboard. Is the baby a boy or girl? How will your designs reflect the gender of the baby? What colors will you use? What animals or flowers will you include? What are designs that will reflect the family of the baby?



AMERICAN INDIAN  
CULTURAL CENTER & MUSEUM

A project of the Native American Cultural & Educational Authority

Newspapers for this educational program provided by:



the  
Chickasaw  
Nation

