

RED EARTH

Native American Cradleboards

A Red Earth Activity Sheet

A bed that Native American used to carry and keep their babies during the day.



Osage cradleboard, Red Earth Deupree Collection

Cradleboards were made by many Indigenous tribes throughout the United States and are still used in some locations. Though most Native families now use strollers and the other accessories of U.S. modern culture, some have chosen to continue use of these ingenious traditional baby carriers.

The basic design of a cradleboard is a flat, hard back made of wood, with woven or cloth sides that enveloped the baby, and could be fastened or laced to safely secure her or him. Most have a footrest, as well as head protection. The materials used to construct the cradleboard and its pieces vary widely according to the tribe and its geographic location.

Cradleboards had, and sometimes still have, a very important use in Native cultures—keep babies safe and to help parents care for them while the parents go about their daily work. Babies were usually carried in cradleboards during their first year, and sometimes longer. Part of the time the mother carried the cradleboard on her back, much like a baby backpack. Since the cradleboards were strong and solid, parents could also lean the baby and cradleboard against a tree, or hang them from a tree limb or saddle, safe above the ground. Sometimes the baby was completely laced up to the chin, and other times the fastening was loosened so that the baby had his or her arms free and could play with little toys that were fastened to the cradleboard.

Like many traditional crafts, individuals, and groups (tribes) decorated these functional pieces in distinctive ways. So, in addition to their obvious uses in childcare, cradleboards also were used to showcase the maker's talent, to express tribal and cultural identity, and to show the receivers' status in the tribe or community. Cradleboards range from fairly simple wood planks with ties, to buckskin or other textile decorated with elaborate beading or quilling.

Did you know?

In certain tribes, cradleboards were designed to ensure not only the physical, but also the spiritual well-being of the baby. Some tribes took special care to select certain types of wood. For example, the Navajos used the eastern side of a cedar, pinon, or pine tree. The Pueblo tribes preferred a piece of wood that had been struck by lightning. Comanches have traditionally performed a special ceremony when the baby is placed for the first time in the finished cradleboard, using prayers and cedar smoke.

Suggested Activities

Think about how other cultures create art from everyday items. For example, are the dishes that you use at home just functional? Some are, but others are decorated with painted flowers, or special-colored glazes, just to make them prettier or more appealing. Why do you think people all over the world spend this extra time making the things around them beautiful? What does it add to our everyday life? Another possibility is to think about ways that your everyday items communicate other messages to those around you. For example, how do some of your everyday items communicate group identity, or social status? (Hint: Do you have things with your school colors or mascot on them? Do you have a church T-shirt? Do you have clothing with brand or designer names on it?)

Create your own art from everyday tools. Do you have a school notebook? or a backpack? or even a bookmark? With a parent's or guardian's permission and supervision, think of ways that you can decorate it with painting, drawing, cut-outs, or other techniques. Think about symbols that mean something important to you (and that respect others' beliefs and values!). How does your decoration communicate something about who you are?

Think about something you can learn from an older person. Techniques for making cradleboards and the traditional decorations used in them were handed down from generation to generation. That is important, so that we are aware of our cultural identity and history and learn to respect those of others. Ask a parent or guardian to help you identify an older adult who has a skill you could learn. Then ask the "elder" to teach you that skill.