

Iti Fabvssa: Choctaw Cultural Art in the Works

From time to time the Historic Preservation employs cultural artists to create art for our 'Iti Fabvssa' articles and presentations that we use to strengthen our community. We would like to share about the process that goes into making these pieces and encourage the community to take part in an artist workshop in August. Our current Choctaw Cultural Artist, Brittany Armstrong, will share her experience working with historical resources to create visual representations of our Choctaw traditional ways.

Choctaws have excelled in artistry for hundreds and thousands of years of making. Think about all of the things we need, use, or decorate that our ancestors needed to make by hand: buildings, games, cooking and eating utensils, baskets, jewelry, boats, weapons, clothing, maps, body paint, tattoos, blankets, and even gifts and memorials. If you were a Choctaw person that lived 200 years ago or 1,000 years ago, do you know how you would decorate yourself, your belongings, your home, or your community? Why does adding cultural information to our Choctaw visual arts enrich our community today?

This summer Brittany Armstrong, a tribal member and a new graduate of UNT, started her cultural artwork by drawing clothing from the 1700's and old Choctaw construction. Brittany's first drawing, Figure 1, shows a Choctaw man's clothing from the 1700's with a breechcloth, leggings, garters, and moccasins. His pucker toe moccasins, the Southeastern style of footwear, would not be worn all the time but were more commonly worn over rough terrain and in the winter. The man's leggings were typically worn together with moccasins and go from the ankle up to the thigh. These were tied to the belt and garters were then tied around the leggings, below the knees, to keep them secure. Garters could be made of buckskin strips or even a thin fingerwoven and beaded band. The breechcloth was made from a rectangular strip of buckskin that passed through the legs and hung over a belt at the front and back of the hips. The Choctaw man seen here is holding an **iti tanampo**, literally a 'wooden gun,' or Choctaw style bow.

A Choctaw woman's clothing from the 1700's, seen in Figure 2, could vary greatly in style. Women also wore moccasins, these being tall pucker toe moccasins, for winter or foot protection when needed. For covering, a woman commonly wore a twined skirt. Twining is a special technique that predates weaving as we know it; you can see a close up of the textile structure in the women's clothing drawing. These skirts could be made of various plant fibers or mixed with animal fibers. The Choctaw woman in Brittany's drawing is holding a **kiti**, or a Choctaw mortar and pestle for grinding corn.

Because we are currently working with the community to revitalize this type of clothing and textiles, we look to a wide array of resources for information about how this clothing was made and worn; we had to think about how the clothes would look as they were worn and how these looked close up or from a distance. As the summer progresses, Brittany plans to draw a view of Choctaw social structure in 1700's. This next project involves making many choices about how Choctaw people would distinguish themselves at this time with clothing, tattoos, tools, and posture to show their social position. There are various sources we can look at to gain a better understanding of how Choctaw people traditionally dressed and carried themselves hundreds and thousands of years ago.

The many resources available to us as a Choctaw people can enrich our artwork with Choctaw traditions. Our primary resource is our community and our elders. The stories, memories, and records of our Choctaw lifeways held by our people form an invaluable treasury of Choctaw culture and history. By

spending time with our families and communities, we can remember and record these stories in our artwork.

When we need more information that may have passed out of memory, we can look at ethnographic writings and archaeological records. While many of the archaeological and ethnographic accounts come from difficult places in our history and from times of historical trauma, we can use these to rebuild and reintegrate traditions that are sleeping. The early Europeans who traveled in Choctaw country, traded with Choctaw people, opened missions or schools in Choctaw country and even fought with or against the Choctaw people often kept records of what they saw during these meetings. These writings are an important resource that we as Choctaw people can reclaim for the rebuilding of our Choctaw culture and traditions.

One such resource is a book by John R. Swanton which brought many ethnographic accounts about southeastern tribes together into one large book, *The Indians of the Southeastern United States*, 1946. His book is available in several places online, free of charge. There you can find quotes from many people in the 1700's who wrote about what they saw among the tribes of the Southeast. Information about our Choctaw clothing, tattoos, customs, and stories are just some of the things included in this book. Many of our 'Iti Fabvssa' articles refer to these ethnographic resources. These past articles can be easily accessed online for research and incorporation into Choctaw artwork.

As for archaeological resources, rich information about Choctaw society can be awakened through this information as well. For example, although most clothing from the past has long ago decayed, we can see examples of clothing through sherds, as in Figure 3, left behind from broken pottery found at old Choctaw village sites. Choctaws and other tribes used recycled cloth to help make large pottery pieces like pans and these cloths left an imprint of their structure on the back. By looking at old pieces of Choctaw pottery, we learn about Choctaw cooking vessels and clothing! These we could incorporate into making new Choctaw cultural art and use in textile revitalization efforts.

We also continue to learn about Choctaw pieces in museums around the world. Using old Choctaw artisan work, recreated pieces for display, or art depicting Choctaw people in the past, we can learn about Choctaw traditional arts that are sleeping. These pieces may have left the Choctaw Nation 300 years ago and are only now returning their knowledge to our people. Through a project called the Chahta Imponna Database, the Historic Preservation department is collecting information and pictures of these special pieces for community members to learn about and for Choctaw artists to incorporate into their artwork. We are happy to provide information about old Choctaw culture and history for artists looking to enrich their knowledge of the old ways.

Why does it matter and who does it affect to create art that reflects the old, traditional Choctaw ways? Through art, we can provide our community and our youth access to the traditions that may be sleeping but are still waiting for our attention. These traditions are part of our identity as Choctaw people and help us remember who we are. By visualizing the traditional Choctaw lifeways, we can better understand our Choctaw ancestors and the lessons they still have to teach us.

Would you like to know about more resources for creating Choctaw cultural art? The Historic Preservation is offering a sketching workshop in August for any interested Choctaw artists: no experience necessary, materials will be provided. For details about the workshop or inquiries about

Choctaw art and culture, please contact Jennifer Byram or the Historic Preservation department by calling 1-800-522-6170 ext. 2512 or emailing jbyram@choctawnation.com.

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2D Cultural Art Workshop

Sketch with a Cultural Artist

Call/Email by **August 6** for details

Contact: Jennifer Byram
Historic Preservation Department
1-800-522-6170 ext. 2512 or
jbyram@choctawnation.com



Figure 1: Drawing of a typical Choctaw man's clothing in the 1700's



Figure 2: Drawing of a typical Choctaw woman's clothing in the 1700's

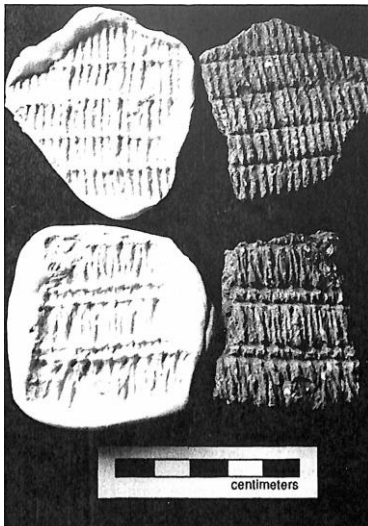


Figure 3: Examples of pot sherds with textile impressions and the casts made of them; Image in Penelope Drooker, *Mississippian Village Textiles at Wickliffe*, 1992.