



# CHEROKEE SHELL CARVING

Written by **Nancy Pheasant**, Eastern Band of Cherokee, in collaboration with the Native Resonance Cohort sponsored by the Native American Indian Association and the Tennessee Arts Commission.



## CONTENT SCOPE

Students will engage with Cherokee culture and art by learning about the moundbuilders and creating their own shell gorget. This hands-on activity incorporates lessons in Cherokee history, culture, and art techniques.

## FOR TEACHERS

Subject & Topic: Social Studies (Native American History) and Art

Grade Level: K-12

Lesson Time: 1 Hour Class Period

Group Size: Regular Class Size (18 - 25 students)

## OBJECTIVES

STUDENTS WILL:

- Learn about the Cherokee people, focusing on their history, culture, and shell carving.
- Understand the significance of shell carving in Cherokee society, including its uses and symbolic meanings.
- Develop skills by creating their own shell gorgets.

## MATERIALS

- Shells (or printed shells)
- Markers
- Leather Cord (or yarn)
- Beads (optional)

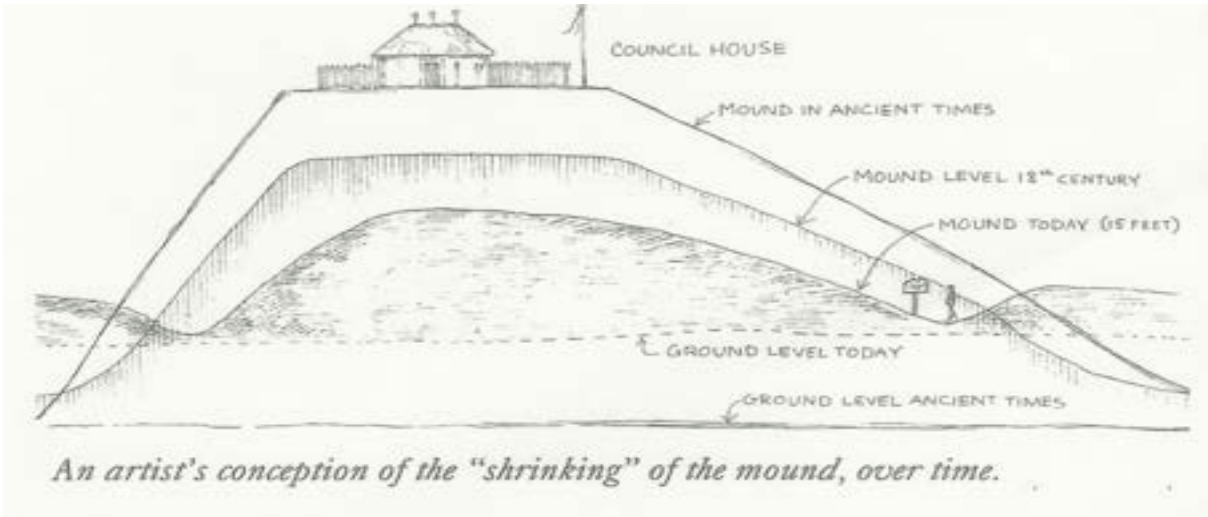


Student example of a shell gorget!

Nancy Pheasant created this custom shell gorget depicting a female chunky player for Shennelle Feather (Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, Diné, Lakota)!

# WHO ARE THE MOUNDBUILDERS?

The mounds were flat structures with layers. They usually were pyramids. Some mounds were like domes. Some mounds were effigy mounds. They had shapes of animals. One famous one is the Serpent Mound in Ohio. The oldest mound is probably the Watson Brake in Louisiana. Usually, elite made workers build the mounds. Some mounds were burial sites for elite people of the tribes. Not all Native American tribes were mound builders. Tribes that are documented as mound builders; Caddo, Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek (Muscogee), Natchez, Wichita, and Winnebago are just a few.



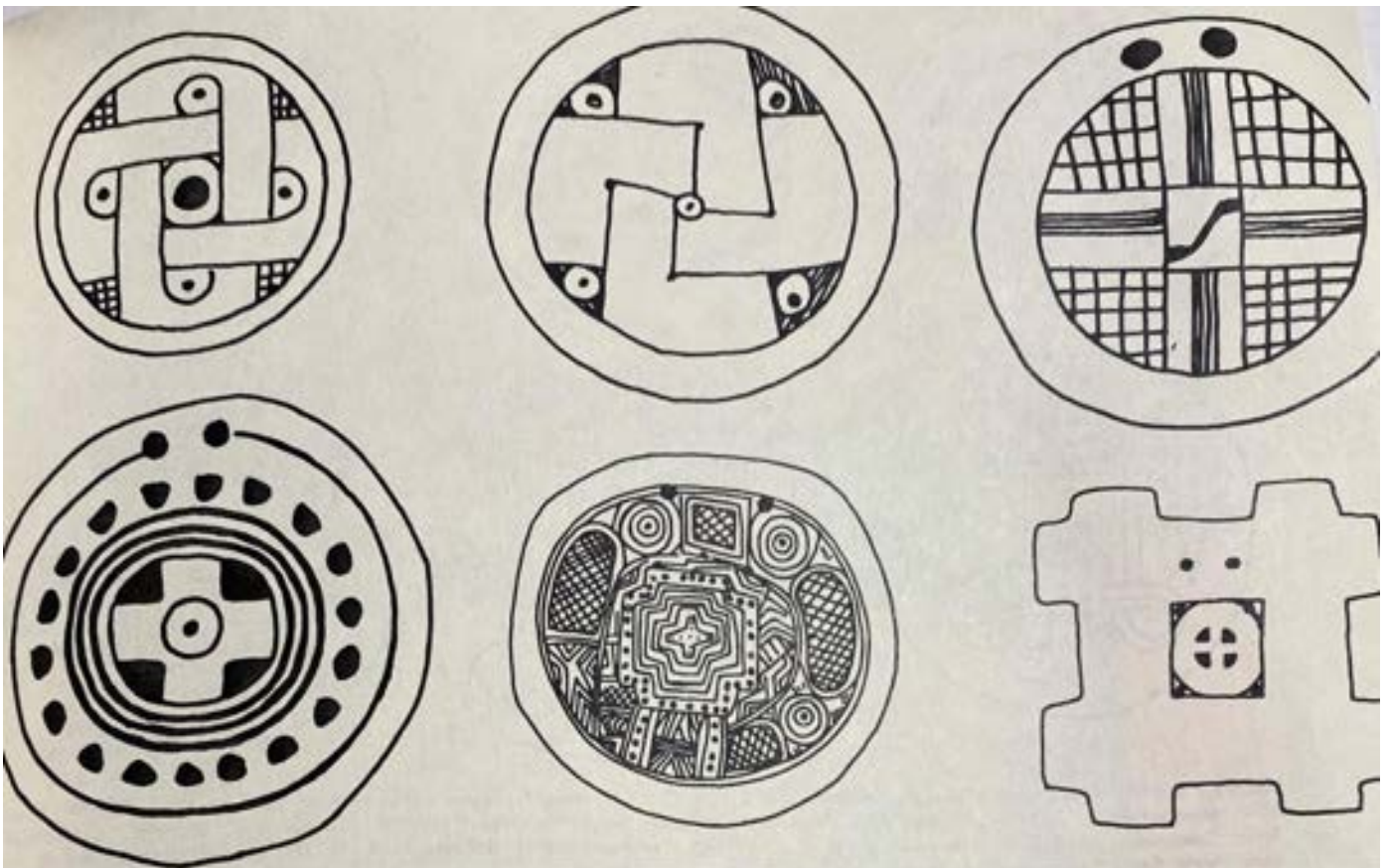
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## NOQUISII MOUND

Noquisiyi (later interpreted as Nikwasi) means star place and was a Cherokee town situated in present-day Franklin, North Carolina. Though its exact age remains unknown, Noquisiyi appears on maps as early as 1544, and British colonial records first mention it by name in 1718. At the heart of Noquisiyi on the banks of the Little Tennessee River, the town's meeting hall once towered over the landscape, built atop the mound which was formed by Cherokee women carrying baskets of soil to that location. Today, Noquisiyi Mound, the settlement's only surviving landmark, rises as the gateway to Franklin.

When archaeologists discover artifacts within Native American ceremonial and burial mounds, they often uncover a wealth of information about the beliefs, customs, and the daily life of our ancestors. These findings provide valuable insight into the artistic expression and craftsmanship of Native American cultures, not to mention their ingenuity. It reflects the interconnectedness of nature, the animals, the plants and the spiritual beliefs within different tribes.





(Designs found on shell gorgets found in Tennessee. Collection of the American Museum of Natural History, Sun Circles and Human Hands, Fundaburk and Foreman)

## SHELL GORGETS

The term Gorget is defined as an article of clothing or armor worn around the neck for protection. Another definition of the term gorget is referenced to the colorful plumage that covers the throat area on birds. The hummingbird is an example.

The Cherokee wore shell gorgets as decorations around their necks. Many were used during ceremonies and gifted to highly respected individuals. The shells were engraved with sharp tools. The Cherokee traded for shells with many coastal tribes.

## ICONOLOGY

It is important to understand that Indigenous people share some customs, beliefs, and traditions. You will also find that some designs used in their art can also be similar. There are some designs used that are specific to a region, or even specific to a tribe.

Not all symbols or designs have the same meaning, for example the interconnected cross in the picture below can symbolize the four directions (North, East, South, and West) for indigenous people that live in the southeastern woodlands however, that same symbol is representative of fertility or rain to tribes found in Central America.



Deconstructing the iconography of symbols on the shell gorget from Tennessee record...

# INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Begin the lesson with a brief overview of the Cherokee people's connection to Tennessee lands. Highlight key historical points, including their forced removal, resilience, and how they have continued to thrive, particularly in North Carolina. In connection with their long history, the teacher will share more about the significance of shell carving particularly for Cherokee peoples. The teacher is encouraged to share more history and background surrounding the shell gorget. Upon understanding the significance shell carving plays in Cherokee culture and history, students will replicate their own Cherokee shell gorget.

## ACTIVITY

We will be making your own shell gorget. This activity is a great way to immerse yourself in Native American culture respectfully while learning more about the culture and honor in wearing a shell gorget. Traditionally, these gorgets were worn by highranking Cherokee members. Shell carving is a skilled and time consuming art practice, so we will be using markers on shells to recreate a shell gorget without the carving tools.

(If using craft shells, drill holes to string the cord through beforehand. Typically two holes side by side is sufficient, see image.)



**1** Decide on the design you would like to recreate in your shell gorget. You may want to practice on paper first.

**2** On a flat surface, place your shell with the smooth side up.

**3** Carefully with markers, draw your design on the shell.

**4** Cut your cord to necklace length and string your shell gorget through the cord.

**5** Optional, add beads and knots to your cord to further decorate.

**6** Tie off your cord and wear your custom shell gorget!

## EVALUATION

Evaluate students based on their engagement in discussions, the effort and creativity displayed in their medallion creation, and their understanding and respect for Cherokee culture and shell carving as reflected in their final piece and participation in class discussions. This lesson plan not only educates students about Cherokee history and art but also encourages them to think critically about indigenous cultures and the importance of preserving such traditions.

- What was the most challenging aspect of creating your shell gorget? How does mastering this technique give you insight into the skill and creativity of Cherokee artisans?
- What have you learned about the significance of shell carving within Cherokee culture, and how does your work honor or contribute to this tradition?
- What iconography did you choose for your shell gorget? What does this represent for you? How can customization enhance your piece?