

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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PRESS PREVIEW:
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ANCIENT ART OF THE AMERICAN WOODLAND INDIANS
EXHIBITED AT NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

WASHINGTON, D.C. February 14, 1985. One hundred and fifty-one masterworks of Native American art go on view at the National Gallery of Art in the Ground Floor Galleries of the East Building from March 17 through August 4, 1985. Ancient Art of the American Woodland Indians explores the cultural history of the Late Archaic, Woodland, and Mississippian periods (3000 B.C. - A.D. 1500) of the Woodlands area of the southeast and midwest of North America.

The Woodlands region extends from the Atlantic coast to the western prairies and from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. Archaeological explorations have yielded a wealth of artifacts -- sculpture, ceramics, copper, and shell objects -- covering a period of almost 5,000 years which were created by the ancestors of present-day Native Americans. These artifacts have significance not only as cultural and archaeological objects but as works of art.

The objects in the exhibition have been discovered largely through archaeological exploration over the past 180 years. Early discoveries were made by explorers in the 1800s and found their way into museums and private collections which have lent the objects for this exhibition. Additional finds have taken place in the past five years.

The exhibition covers three distinct periods of Woodland history. The first is the Late Archaic period extending from 3000 B.C. to 1000 B.C. During

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this period societies which were organized into bands or extended family groups and which roamed in search of seasonally available food moved toward settlements in major river valleys. The exhibition begins with the artistic products of this period: uniquely fashioned copper tools and weapons, imaginative pendants and ornaments, and "bannerstones" which served as weights on the shaft of a spear-thrower. These colorful stone objects with their polished surfaces and precise contours have a curiously contemporary appeal.

The second period is the Woodland period dating from 1000 B.C. to A.D. 900. During this time, the Woodland culture extended its settlements in river territories and came to rely more on local resources for food and other necessities. Trade with other communities expanded throughout the continent. Materials acquired in trade, such as copper, shell and mica, were incorporated in ceremonial objects portraying serpents, birds, bears, and other animals considered to be spiritually potent.

The third period, the Mississippian, dates from 900 - 1500 A.D. During this time, the culture became highly organized and agricultural. Large towns grew in choice river valley locations. One city, Cahokia, existed in the twelfth century on a site outside the present-day St. Louis. In size and population, Cahokia was larger than contemporary Paris or London. The iconography of the culture's religious system, with its many symbols, dominated the art of this period.

The exhibition has been organized by The Detroit Institute of Arts. David W. Penney, Associate Curator of the Department of African, Oceanic and New World Cultures, The Detroit Institute of Arts, is the organizing curator. Michael Kan, Acting Director of The Detroit Institute of Arts, is the project coordinator.

Scientific consultants for the exhibition, in addition to Michael Kan, were Dr. James A. Brown, professor of anthropology at Northwestern University and Dr. David F. Brose, curator of anthropology at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. Assistance was also provided by Native American museum professionals George H.J. Abrams, Director of the Seneca-Iroquois National Museum, Salamanca, New York; Michael Taylor, a member of the Native American Advisory Board of the Denver Museum of Natural History; and Dr. Thomas Volk, member of the faculty of Oakland Community College, Bloomfield Hills.

The exhibition will travel to The Detroit Institute of Arts from September 3 through November 11, 1985 and to The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, from December 21, 1985 through March 9, 1986.

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION or photographs contact Katherine Warwick, Assistant to the Director (Information Officer), or Anne Hartzell, Information Office, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 20565 (202)842-6353.