

Louisiana Indian Heritage Association
Humanities Scholar: Fred Cureau, BS, MAT
November 2008 Humanities Topic:
The Iconology of the Pre-Columbian Eastern and Central United States and
Its Influence on Art and Ceremonial Activities

SYNOPSIS

The Poverty Point Culture of Northern Louisiana flourished in approximately 1000 BC. Like other Mississippian cultures during this era located in the Eastern and Midwestern US, the peoples have used symbols in their art, ceremonial mounds and spiritual observances. Many of these motifs were of mythological creatures reflecting their concepts of the workings of their world - both physical and spiritual - while others represented animals of special importance. A great number of the iconic artifacts found are of the Sun, which was for many groups, was a representation of the giver of life and the face of the Creator. A final group representative of the various ceremonies and dances performed.

Some of the most obvious examples of the symbols are the iconic mounds. Many of these structures were overlooked until the growing use of aircraft revealed their shapes from the air. Poverty Point, in Northern Louisiana, contains a large platform mound in the shape bird of prey. Buffalo Rock State Park, located along the Illinois River near Ottawa, Illinois, holds the effigies of a water spider, frog and catfish. Along Ohio's Bush Creek lies the famous Great Serpent Mound, with its undulating body and mouth ready to consume, what is thought to be the cosmic egg or the moon. Many of these mounds, like other mounds and mound groups, were laid out to coincide with celestial directions, in many cases, provided a calendar predicting sunrise and moon rise at various times of the year.

Tobacco pipes often were embellished with carefully carved animal representations. Starting about the first century A.D., tube pipes appeared in Tennessee, Ohio and the contiguous areas with figures of animals and human carved in relief on stone or fired clay tube pipes. By the second century, the platform pipe took its place beside the tube pipe eventually replacing the tube form. These pipes held wondrous carvings of almost every animal found in the environment, as well as human effigies. It is suspected that the animal figure represented sacred animals to the village or clan. The Woodland Period (1A.D. to 1000A.D.) produced some of the most beautiful and anatomically accurate carvings, where as the subsequent Mississippian Period is identified with more complex, but less accurate or more abstract carvings on pipes, pottery and other carvings done marine shell and slate and copper hammering and casts

The Mississippian Culture stretching from about 1000A.D. to 1500A.D. is best represented by the Spiro phases, the Cahokia phases, the Moundville Groups, Etowah, and the Caddo among others. This period contains hammered copper ornaments, carved marine shell and slate gorgets or pendants, human figures carven on stone and beautiful pottery. The icons found on many of these objects represent dancers, mythological creatures, the rattlesnake and birds of prey. In the latter part of the Mississippian the so-called, Southern Ceremonial Complex developed along with its own set of motifs. The weeping eye, forked-eye, barred oval, Sun Circle, the eye in hand, skull and bones, the cross or swastika in a circle with smooth or petaloid edges, and the striped central pole. Many of these concepts came from the Mississippian concepts of the three tiered earth and cosmology.

The Mississippian concept of the world consisted of a three-leveled earth each dominated by its own group of creatures, spirits and forces. The middle world, on which they lived, was sandwiched between the upper world, or sky, and the underworld all connected by a tree of life or central pole or axis. Creatures, who inhabited the upper world, could fly, both real and mythical. The birds of prey, feathered serpent, thunder beings, the Sun, and other celestial objects dominated the upper realm. Creatures such as the horned serpent and the water panther occupied the lower world. It is believed that there was an ongoing struggle between creatures of the upper and lower realms with man caught in between. Many of the ceremonies were likely directed towards these creatures or cosmic objects.

Some archaeologists speculate that the Mississippian Culture was already in decline upon arrival of the Europeans. Whether this is true or not, we know that much of what was part of the aboriginal America was replaced by genocide of the indigenous peoples and the changing ways of life brought by the Europeans. The remnants that afford hints of pre-Columbian cultures of North America are the artifacts with their icons and motifs.

Fred Cureau, BS, MAT VITAE

Fred Cureau is a Louisiana Choctaw with memberships in the Louisiana Band of the Choctaw and the Bayou Lacombe Choctaw. For the past twenty years, he has attempted to recapture his lost culture through the study of the native cultures, their histories, art, spirituality, music and dance. He has been a long time member of the Many Nations Singers and now sings with the Yellow Moon Singers, a community service drum. Seeking to better understand his culture, Fred has learned to bead in the Choctaw style, weave Choctaw peeled river cane baskets, reproduced clay pipes and pottery using traditional methods and clays, and reproduces carved gorgets in both shell and stone using pre-Columbian motifs from the Woodlands and Mississippian Cultures. He believes that by doing what the ancestors did and using the methods they employed, he can better connect with and understand their cultures. He has regularly worked with youth groups teaching native crafts and indigenous ways.

Mr. Cureau earned a Bachelor of Science degree with triple majors in biology, chemistry and physics with minors in education, psychology and social science from Nicholls State University Thibodaux, LA. in 1971. He earned a Master of Arts in Teaching Science specializing in geology and environmental science with 45 additional graduate hours in the sciences. Mr. Cureau has worked in cancer research at Oschner Foundation and data processing in pathology at Charity Hospital in New Orleans. He has retired from the St. Tammany Parish School System with thirty-two years teaching chemistry, physics, biology, environmental science, and geology. In addition, he has taught required medically oriented science courses for nursing students at Delgado Community Collage and has conducted summer seminars for teachers at Louisiana State University.