

Wampum— Beads of Respect and Agreement

McCord
STEWART
MUSEUM

The Great Law of Peace

Five Nations unite to become the Haudenosaunee Confederacy

Hundreds of years before Europeans arrived on Indigenous lands, the Five Nations or Five Lands (Onöndowa'ga, Gayogo hó:nq', Onoñda'gega', Onyota'a:ka, and Kanien'kehá:ka) fought each other violently, with war erupting throughout their territories. Unity was attained when the Peacemaker ventured from nation to nation, with Aionwahta and Tiekónh:sase, the First Clan Mother. The wampum was then presented as a power for healing and restoring light to each nation, and seeking to bring peace and harmony with his gift of the Great Law of Peace, that unity was attained. With his achievement in reviving four of the five nations, only one in particular did not accept this new way of living. Adordarho, Chief of the Onoñda'gega' Nation, who was said to be a crooked man with snakes in his hair and wearing human bones as jewellery, initially rejected this kind of coexistence until he eventually gave up his old ways and accepted the Peacemaker's alliance. With the Five Nations now free from war and united in peace and mutual respect, they would later bind together to create what would commonly be known as the



ÖNONHKWAROU'TA' → WAMPUM
WÍSK NIHONONHONTSA'KE
→ FIVE NATIONS

Haudenosaunee Confederacy, experiencing a nationhood that would last for centuries and living alongside the French, English, and Dutch.

As mentioned in the Great Law of Peace, the Peacemaker presented wampum as a sign of respect and honesty and as a symbol of healing. Representing the unification of the Confederacy following the period during which the nations waged war against each other, wampum was used to unite and liberate the Five Nations. The image above features the Hiawatha belt, which symbolizes the Haudenosuane people once they had come together as a Confederacy of Five Nations. Later, in 1722, the Tuscaroras would become the sixth nation.

OHARENNÁHTA OR
ARIHWA'KONHNEHA
→ PURPLE

KARÀ:KEN → WHITE



Traditional practice and process

What is wampum?

Wampum or *onekóhrha* in the Kanien'kehá:ka language is a small cylindrical bead around 3 to 5 mm in diameter and 7 to 10 mm in length. These beads are primarily white with small sections of purple made from the quahog seashell found predominantly on the east coast of the Atlantic Ocean where the Anishnaabe nations reside.

Belts & strings

Wampum was traditionally used for diplomatic and political purposes. The belts were woven mostly by female and male artisans to document and solidify political agreements and relationships between nations or with other peoples. Strands of wampum beads were also used in political meetings, often as a sign of respect and honesty and signifying a person's degree of authority when appearing at a political gathering such as a grand council. Chiefs and Clan Mothers would hold a string of wampum when speaking at meetings, while messengers

would carry them when imparting news from one nation to the next. Wampum was also used in the adoption ceremony to adopt an individual, a family or another Indigenous nation. To this day, wampum plays an important role for the Onkwehón:we people of North America.

Did you know? Considering that, on average, a person could make 40 beads per day and that some of the largest wampum belts contain as many as 11,000 beads, it could take from 270 to 280 days to make the right number of beads for a wampum belt! Fortunately, wampum-making was all about sharing.

Due to the time it took to make the beads, wampum was also used as a gift and was highly valued depending on its colour. Purple, called *oharanaten* in the Kanien'kehá:ka language, was more highly valued because of the colour's rarity. As the purple pigment in a shell is rarer than white, purple wampum beads could be up to twice as expensive.

IÁ:IA'K NIKAHÍÓSAKE → HEXAGON

KAIÉ:RI NIIOHÍÓSONTE
→ DIAMOND SHAPE

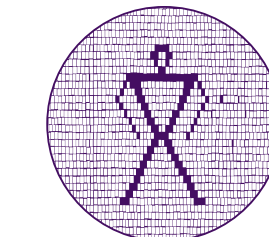
TEIOTEKERON:TE → SQUARE

ÓN:KWE KARÁHSTON → FIGURE
EPICTED ON WAMPUM BELT

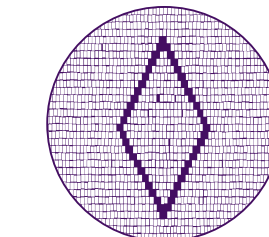
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Reading wampum

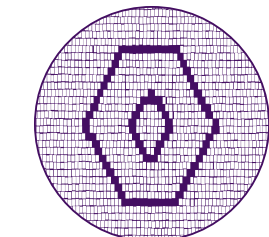
Traditionally, depending on the wampum belt's message, certain wampum are to be read either horizontally or vertically. They are to be held while their message is verbally conveyed to the audience during a council or diplomatic meeting, and they are not necessarily worn as regalia. The colours seen on a wampum belt may be quite bright and intense, representative of significant symbolic meanings. For example, the colour purple symbolizes diplomacy and powerful alliance while white wampum represents respect and friendly relations. Combined, these two colours represent a broad spectrum of relationships and exchanges, from peaceful understanding to political tensions.



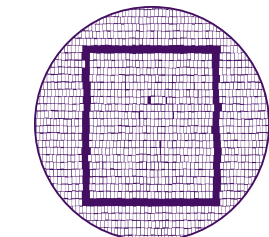
ÓN:KWE KARÁHSTON → HUMAN FIGURE



KAIÉ:RI NIIOHÍÓSONTE
→ DIAMOND SHAPE



IÁ:IA'K NIKAHÍÓSAKE → HEXAGON



TEIOTEKERON:TE → SQUARE



4

O:KWIRE → TREE
KAION:NI → LINE/ROW
ATO:KEN → AXE



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Wampum belts

Discuss

What is one thing that you found interesting about the wampum belt's message? Do you think wampum and the way they are read is easy to understand? If so, explain and share with those around you.

Imagine

Imagine holding one of these belts. Try to imagine how much each belt weighs. Do you think they are heavy?

For example, the *Three Figures Wampum* (M1912) weighs almost half a kilo!

Did you know?

During times of war, wampum belts were painted with red pigment to signify a breach in the peace and in respect between two or more parties. As such, the red-dyed wampum refer to a conflictual context.

AHCHARA' → WAMPUM OR
WAMPUM BELT



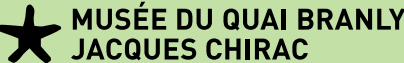
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Words in indigenous languages:

- KAN IEN'KEHA
- ABÉNAKI
- WENDAT

1. Hiawatha Belt, OnondagaNation.org
2. Wampum belt, Huron-Wendat, 1760-1815, quahog, whelk, animal bone, vermilion, leather, hemp. M20401, McCord Stewart Museum
3. Charles Joseph Hullmandel, *Nicolas Vincent Tsawenhohi holding the wampum symbolizing the alliance between the British crown and the Seven Nations of Canada*, made from an oil on canvas by Edward Chatfield, 1825, lithograph enhanced with watercolours. Gift of Ms. Walter M. Stewart, M20855, McCord Stewart Museum
4. Wampum belt, unknown provenance, 1700s, quahog, whelk, hide, hemp. M1905, McCord Stewart Museum
5. Wampum belt, unknown provenance, 1700s, quahog, whelk, hide, hemp. M1912, McCord Stewart Museum
6. William Notman, *The Onondaga chief Isaac Hill Kaweneseronton of the Six Nations Confederacy with a Wampum in His Hand and Another around His Neck, Montreal, 1870*. I-48873, McCord Stewart Museum
7. Wampum belt fragment, 1750-1830, shell bead, plant fibre. UA177, McCord Stewart Museum
8. *Adorned women*, engraving from Samuel de Champlain's book *Les voyages de la Nouvelle France occidentale, dicte Canada, faits par le Sr de Champlain*, Paris, P. Le-Mur, 1632. HC-1632.2, McCord Stewart Museum
9. *Reconstitution du rassemblement du 4 août 1701 précédant la signature de la Grande Paix de Montréal*, 2001, Francis Back (1959-2017)
10. Wampum belt, unknown provenance, 1700s, quahog, whelk, hide, hemp. M1910, McCord Stewart Museum
11. Samuel Douglas Smith Huyghue, *Drawing of the four wampum belts hanging on the wall in the Lorette [Wendake] chapel prior to the fire of 1862, 1846*
12. Skawennati, 2020, Czech glass, beads, leather, artificial sinew, Collection of the artist
13. Intergalactic, Empowerment Wampum (Overlord, LGM, Twi'lek, Onkwehon:we, Na'vi)

This project was developed in conjunction with *Wampum: Beads of Diplomacy*, an exhibition developed and co-produced with Paris's musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac.



This project was carried out as part of an internship with the McCord Stewart Museum's Department of Education, Community Engagement and Cultural Programs in the summer of 2023 by Sakoianonha:wi Curotte and Agatha Lambert.

The McCord Stewart Museum warmly thanks Rio Tinto for making it possible for community and school groups from Indigenous nations, for whom wampum still play a fundamental role, to visit the exhibition.

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Gender roles

In the Haudenosaunee, Anishnaabe, Huron-Wendat, and Waban-Aki societies, women played a significant role in social, economic, and political matters. In Iroquoian societies, Clan mothers were the first to address issues requiring the chiefs' diplomatic and political attention, as well as war-related problems that needed to be resolved or circumvented. In this way, Clan Mothers and their clan citizens were involved in decision-making and creating objects that referred to these issues, such as the use of strings and belts of wampum used in adoptions. Although the weaving process was not strictly reserved for women, their contribution to wampum-making was acknowledged by Indigenous communities, as well as in English and French documents from the early 18th century. In particular, their dexterity in weaving wampum strings together to create a belt is admired. French authorities called on their skills to make wampum belts for agreements with other Indigenous nations. It should also be noted that both Indigenous and European men wove wampum. Thus the division of labour in creating wampum necessarily involved both genders.

"In the Waban-Aki community, wampum belts were kept by women. The men could not do this because they had to fight. We often do not know who made these belts. We've tended to think they were made by men because they were male offerings to other males. However, it is possible to think that as the years passed women also started making them: women would thresh ash trees and take over all those male tasks when the men were away. We can tell that some of the longer wampum belts have been made by several people because of differences in the weaving: you have to know about weaving techniques to see this because it is not obvious. So the women also made wampum belts and helped men perform this task. We need to celebrate the women who worked so hard in the shadows to make them!"

Nicole Obomsawin

Nicole O'Bomsawin, Clémence Fort, Paz Núñez-Regueiro, Nikolaus Stolle and Leandro Varison, « Entretien avec Nicole O'Bomsawin. Le wampum et la culture abénakise, entre passé et présent », Gradhiva [Online], 33 | 2022



European exchanges and trade – Montreal Peace Treaty of 1701

At the beginning of the 17th century, trade between Indigenous peoples and Europeans intensified, and wampum quickly became one of the key elements of this new market. Produced following contact with Europeans, these precious beads were made with metal-cutting tools, with the aim of standardizing them. Furthermore, the Europeans adopted the rules of the council and made agreements with their Indigenous partners. Smoking the peace pipe and exchanging gold and silver wares became commonplace. It was frowned upon for the English and French not to comply with the custom of exchanging goods such as wampum.

Signed on August 4, 1701, in Montreal, the treaty of the Great Peace of Montreal brought together 39 Indigenous nations and the French to end the wars between the various parties. Negotiated over 4 years and involving 31 wampum, this treaty was a turning point in Franco-Indigenous relations. This agreement illustrates the use and importance of wampum in both peace and war. In a ceremony of this magnitude, the wampum stands out as a



"In short, when they speak to us, they do it with a shorter Belt or String than that which we spoke to them with, tho' they can make Wampum and we cannot [...] our strong Belts are lost in their Hands [...]. I fear they only speak from their Mouth, and not from their Hearts."
Tokaaion, Goyogouin chief, 1758



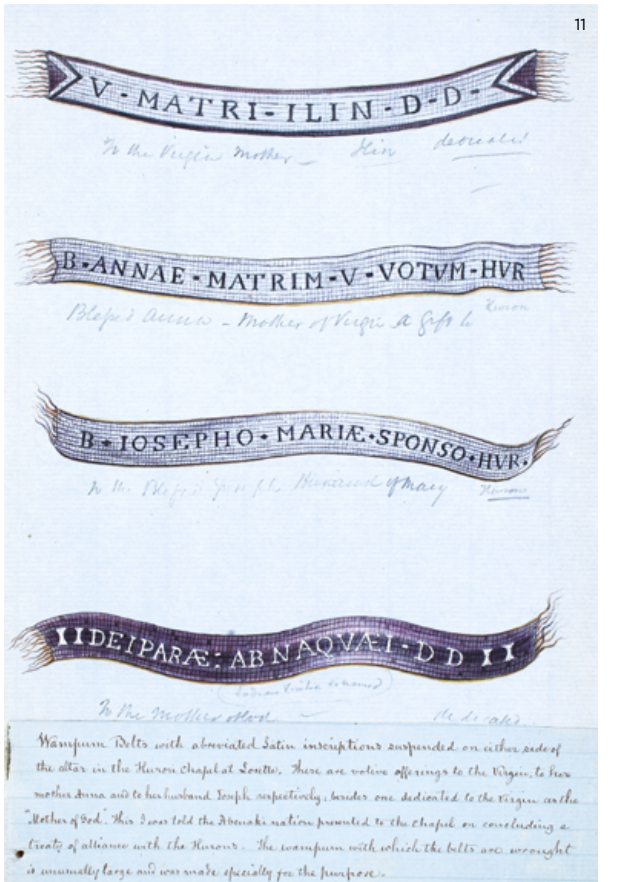
mediating object when negotiating the peace, but also as a tool for governing nations. In fact, it is associated with mourning and death, as well as with peace and condolence rituals. It is a versatile object that determines the order in which ceremonies are conducted.

Do you think that if wampum had been respected and their messages followed throughout history, some historical events would have turned out differently?

Syncretism

Do you think that syncretism is a cultural force due to intercultural exchange, or does it necessarily lead to loss?

There was close contact with missionaries and the Church in Indigenous communities, where it was not uncommon for priests to settle and live within the village. Even if these exchanges were once perceived as attempts at assimilation and acculturation, they bear witness to the great openness of the Huron-Wendat and Waban-Aki communities, as well as others. This has led to productive exchanges and syncretism—a fusion of doctrines that were not initially designed to work together—that has enabled different cultures to recognize facets of themselves in each other. The flexibility of Indigenous peoples in relation to the Catholic religion is remarkable and is evidence of the notions of alliance and fraternity fostered by the wampum. To provide a specific example, one of the two wampum belts at Chartres Cathedral shows how the Waban-Aki celebrated the Virgin Mary, in whom they recognized the matrilineality so important to their culture. The Latin inscriptions dictated by a missionary were transcribed by the people who made the wampum, demonstrating their remarkable ability to learn from other cultures.



Can you think of another object that is an example of syncretism?

ONYIATENRO' → WE ARE TWO FRIENDS

W8B8BI → WAMPUM

ADWIWI → BEING TOGETHER AS A GROUP

Contemporary voices

How are wampum used today?

In 2022, during the World Lacrosse Championships, when the Haudenosaunee Nationals Lacrosse Organization had not been invited, the Irish team decided to withdraw from the championship in order to give them their place. Considering that the Haudenosaunee are the inventors of this historical sport and that they deserved to participate, Team Ireland made this gesture, reflecting their values and the unity symbolized by the sport. In gratitude, the Hodinöhsö:ni' team presented the Irish team with a two-row wampum belt, a symbol of the union between the two nations. This wampum, inspired by one used in 1613 between the Kanien'kehá:ka and the Dutch, shows how these belts are still in use today in the same way, reflecting a vibrant cultural heritage with an enduring purpose.

Even today, wampum are presented in Canadian courts by various Indigenous nations as a symbol of resistance and as proof of rights. Witness to treaties and agreements made with Europeans centuries ago, they are still used in political events. In addition, contemporary artists are reappropriating the tradition of wearing these belts, creating them with contemporary designs that reflect present-day concerns. This is particularly true of the multimedia artist Skawennati, whose beadwork projects propel Indigenous characters into a futuristic world. In this way, wampum act as memory aids, helping people to remember important messages that are encoded in the beads. They are timeless, allowing centuries-old messages to live on. From ancestral wampum to the most contemporary ones, the wisdom of the Indigenous nations endures.

Can you think of a contemporary object that would have a political and symbolic power like the wampum?

