

Blue Beads

Kyra Cundall

When Lewis and Clark started their long journey west, they brought many things that the North American settlers at that time valued, such as needles, furs, and guns, in order to use them as trade items. They were surprised when they learned that the colored beads they brought with them were often prized above these other items among the Native American tribes. Lewis and Clark were able to trade these beads for horses, furs, supplies, and safe passage through Native American territory.

To Lewis and Clark, the beads were just cheap trinkets used for decorative purposes. The beads had no important cultural, spiritual, or religious meaning, and since the beads were so inexpensive and easy to make they didn't hold much value for white explorers.

The Native Americans saw the beads in a very different way. The beads had special symbolic value because of their shape, which the Native Americans associated with seeds or berries. The beads were hard and clear like natural minerals, and the polished surfaces were reflective like water. Some tribes believed that the reflective surface could be used to see a person's soul.

The beads quickly became a source of prestige, wealth, and luxury among the Native Americans. In Native American culture, the beads symbolized things such as long life, well being, and success in hunting, fishing, warfare, and courtship. They used these beads for trade with other tribes, wore them as necklaces, incorporated them into loom weavings, and also sewed them on to their clothes, dolls, baskets, and sashes.

COLOR	NATIVE AMERICAN MEANINGS
Blue	Sky, Water, Moon
Black	Night, Disease, Death
Red	Blood, War, Earth
White	Winter, Snow, Death
Yellow	Sunshine, Day, Dawn

Color had a lot of meaning to the Native Americans, but sometimes the various tribes attributed different meanings to each color. This chart has a few examples of what different colors meant to some of the Native American tribes.

The color of a bead held a special significance (see chart), and to a lot of Native Americans the blue bead was the most prized of them all. Various tribes saw the blue beads as a symbol for water, clouds, life, and lightning, and occasionally referred to them as a piece of the sky. Some even thought the color blue was the most sacred color of all and used it to honor their gods.

As you can see, value can be defined in many different ways. Even if something is inexpensive, it might be seen as an important symbol for religious, spiritual, or cultural reasons. As you continue to read the story *Streams to the River, River to the Sea*, pay attention to the many small ways in which the author shows you how much these beads meant to Sacagawea and the rest of the Native Americans in the story.

Resources:

Native American Market. (2011). *Glass trade beads: Their history and significance to the American Indian*. Article retrieved in 2011 from http://www.native-american-market.com/glass_trade_beads.html.

Nevada State Library Department of Cultural Affairs. (2011). *Native American designs and colors*. Article retrieved in 2011 from (<http://lewisandclarktrail.com/section2/colorsanddesigns.htm>).

Prindle, T. (1999). *Value of glass beads and Native Americans*. Article retrieved in 2011 from <http://www.nativetech.org/glasbead/glasvalu.html>.

Permission to reprint this article has been granted by Kyra Cundall, author.