

Cultural Preservation in Indigenous Cultures

Storytelling in indigenous cultures has a vibrant history of cultural preservation and education spanning thousands of years. It is a way for tribes to connect with their past, honor their ancestors, maintain a sense of identity, and pass these lessons on to their children. Oral traditions allowed for a dynamic and interactive experience allowing stories to remain alive and vibrant. Often paired with oral storytelling, visual arts were used to record important events in the lives of Indigenous Peoples.

Pictographs

Pictographs are pictures or symbols that represent words or ideas. Indigenous peoples would grind up colorful plants and minerals and mixed them with protein-based liquids to create paint colors. The pigments were applied using sticks, brushes, fingers or hands to surfaces such as rocks, animal skins, or tree bark.

The Lakota people recorded their history in the form of a winter count. Once a year, leaders of the Lakota would review the major events that occurred, select the one that was most significant to them, and then the keeper of the winter count would add a pictograph to the growing history. The keeper would then share the stories of each previous year.

Petroglyphs

Petroglyphs are images and designs that were made by engraving, carving, or scratching away the dark layer of rock varnish on a rock's surface to reveal the lighter rock underneath. Archeologists believe that stone hammers and other stone tools were used to create the images which can often be found in caves, on rock surfaces, or on the side of cliffs.

Judaculla Rock in Cullowhee, North Carolina is a soapstone boulder with 1,548 carvings on it, the most of any other rock in the Eastern United States. "The legend says that he wanted a wife, so he took a woman from a local Cherokee tribe and brought her into the spirit world. The woman's mother and brother wanted her back, though, so they went to fast for seven days outside the cave entrance to the spirit world in order to see her. Her brother broke the fast after only six days, and Tsu'kala reentered the physical world—through Judaculla Rock—to punish him. Tsu'kala killed the brother with lightning, and the woman was so distraught that she wanted to return to the physical world, but Tsu'kala wouldn't let her. Instead, he made a deal with the Cherokee to allow them to have eternal life in the spirit world after death. The carvings are believed to be directions on how to enter the spirit world (Magazine, 2019)."

The visuals created by indigenous peoples served as a lasting record of their history before the use of written language became widespread. Today, these ancient forms of communication continue to be studied for their ability to convey a story through the power of imagery.

Resources:

Carnegie Institute. (n.d.). The Carnegie Winter Count. North South East West Carnegie Museum of Natural History. <https://nsew.carnegiemnh.org/lakota-nation-of-the-plains/winter-court/>

Magazine, S. (2019, July 18). Eight spots in the United States where you can see petroglyphs. Smithsonian.com. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/eight-spots-in-united-states-where-you-can-see-petroglyphs-180972445/>

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