Identity By Design: Tradition, Change, and Celebration in Native Women's Dresses, Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of the American Indian

What do your clothes say about you? We all dress in our own style. Sometimes, our clothes are meant to make a statement. Sometimes clothing can even tell a story. This is especially true in the Native American cultures in the United States and Canada. Generations of Native American women have been using clothing to tell their stories.

Native American Fact: Native American women have always had the role of passing down what is important to their people. The women pass along the cultural traditions and values of the tribe. One important way of passing along tribal identity and family values is to make traditional Native dresses.

Native American Fact: The Native American dresses are beautifully decorated with beads and natural materials. Native women express their creativity in the dress. They also tell the significant events in their family’s history. Many of the pieces of clothing have beautiful symbols. The symbols might also represent what the tribe respects, loves, and values.

Native American Fact: Dressing in special attire is important for the Assiniboine and Sioux tribes from Montana. They dress in the handmade clothes for important cultural events and celebrations. The women of these tribes may work for months on clothing to wear to weddings, naming celebrations (where a person is officially given a name in their Native language), community celebrations, and powwows (Native dance festivals).

You can visit this virtual exhibition to learn more about Native clothing. This exhibition includes a large and diverse collection of dresses and accessories made by Native women in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. The clothing highlights their artistry and creativity. You’ll also get a sense of the strong tradition and values of the Native tribes. Learn more at the Smithsonian: http://www.nmai.si.edu/exhibitions/identity%5Fby%5Fdesign/IdentityByDesign.html

ePals Activity: It may seem like the way you dress for special occasions is very different than the way Native Americans might dress. However, there are some similarities in the way that all people prepare and dress for special occasions. Think about what might be the same. How is the type of clothing the same? How are the accessories the same? Does the way you dress for special occasions include any symbols? What other preparations are the same as in the Native culture? Think about your answers, then write a thoughtful email to your teacher, classmate or ePal.

See more classroom activities in ePals Gallery of Smithsonian Activities.