

Adornment from nature

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Finding a use for everything is a hallmark of Indigenous people. Very little went to waste. Since everything needed to survive must be grown, hunted, gathered, or fashioned by hand, many items served multiple functions. Such is the case with hair pipe adornment.

In prehistoric times these long hollow beads were made from bone, shell, copper, or stone. The beads were strung on rawhide or sinew and used as hair adornment or were worn in the ears, mainly by men. Dentalium shell was hollow and tube shaped varying in length from 1 ½" to 3 ½" in length. This was simpler to use than bone, copper, or stone which took a long time to fashion or drill. After settlers arrived and trade began, drilled marine conch shell became a sought after trade item. A whole settlement in the Park Ridge , New Jersey area provided much of the drilled conch shell to traders. These long hollow beads were referred to as hair pipe by the traders as they saw them used as hair adornment, but they were used in a variety of ways; as strung earrings, long single or multiple strand necklaces, as single or multiple row chokers, as breastplates, and as decoration on awl cases, quivers, parfleches, and pouches.

Particularly popular among the southern plains tribes was the use of bone or horn hair pipe beads. They became more valued than the shell hair pipe since they were much sturdier and the shell beads were prone to crack easily or chip leaving sharp edges and causing the whole item to have to be restrung. The breastplates and chokers for men and women were also thought to deflect arrows and protect the throat and chest area, although the main use was decorative. The use of bone hair pipe spread rapidly to the northern plains tribes and is seen used extensively during the 1800's until the present.

