



# Native Art at the Sherburne NWR Amphitheater

## A Long and Significant History

Ever since the glaciers receded more than 10,000 years ago, Native peoples have lived in and traveled through the area that now comprises the Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge. In fact, village sites more than 700 years old have been discovered on the refuge. The original stewards of the land were considering their impact on the environment and sustainability well before the Seventh Generation Principle was ever articulated. For example, their prescribed fires maintained the landscape for hunting as well as for grazing by bison, elk, and deer; and they were careful not to harvest the entirety of the plants they depended on for food, medicine, and ceremony—including *psin* (Dakota) or *manoomin* (Ojibwe)—wild rice—after which the refuge’s Mahnomen Trail was named. Thus, the seeds of these plants continue to produce flowers, fruits, and more seeds to this day.

Things were to change, however. In the early 1800’s, with its significant navigable rivers, as well as lakes, wildlife, and abundant resources, the land that in 1858 was to become the state of Minnesota (Mni Sóta) began attracting great numbers of European settlers. Settlement drastically changed not only the land, but the people who were living on it and how they lived. Despite a history of tragedy and disruption, today Native Americans carry forward their traditions and retain the right to collect sage and other materials from the refuge for ceremonial and customary uses; and this amphitheater recognizes their important contributions to this land as well as our culture.

## The Amphitheater’s Native Art

The presence of traditional yet contemporary Native American art at the refuge gives visibility to the important past and current presence of Indigenous people in Minnesota. The Indigenous artwork here incorporates Native values and includes plants and animals significant to the refuge as well as to Native Americans. At the center of the circular stage area is a representation of sacred Native tobacco (*caŋšaša* – Dakota or *asemaa* - Ojibwe), one variety of which in our area is *Lobelia inflata*. (Note that this is *not* cigarette tobacco!) Native tobacco is used for prayer and as an offering to send “good intentions and thoughts into the four directions.” Note that the seed pods of the plant point in the 4 cardinal directions and also suggest a star, symbolizing that “we all come from the stars.” Surrounding the Native tobacco are animals important to Native culture and tradition. The bison, deer, crane, eagle, bear, and turtle are shown in “x-ray style,” which, according to Anishinaabe-Ojibwe artist Giizh Agaton Howes, is an Ojibwe technique that, in effect, allows you to “see inside” the animals. The animals are looking at each other, and the line running between them represents that they are all connected, as we are all connected.

Finally, emphasizing the sense of connection and our relationship to the land and what grows here, a Dakota-style floral hoop surrounds the presentation area. This floral hoop, created by Dakota artist Holly Young in the Native quillwork style, includes representations of plants native to

Minnesota’s prairie, savanna, and wetlands. Plants are important because they have traditionally supported our sustenance, health, and well-being. Look carefully because these plants are not shown the way you may usually see them! Do you see coneflowers, rose hips, bush clover, evening primrose, Native tobacco—or maybe even something else?

The seat walls of the amphitheater also depict designs and words of special significance. Look for the tracks of each animal—bison, deer, crane, eagle, bear, and turtle. Then note the Dakota and Ojibwe words for each of the animals next to the tracks. You’ll also find a small gray squirrel, which was added in memory of a longtime friend and Friends board member who left us too soon.

**Want to know more about the words on the seat walls and how to pronounce them?**

- To learn how to pronounce the Ojibwe words, see [The Ojibwe People’s Dictionary: https://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu/about](https://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu/about)
- To learn how to pronounce Dakota words, download the *Prairie Island Language App* for your Apple or Android smart phone. [Note that **pté**, not listed there, is pronounced p-DAY.]

<p><b>Bison</b>  <b>Dakota</b>                      <b>Ojibwe</b>            Pté  Bizhiki</p>	<p><b>Bear</b>  <b>Dakota</b>                      <b>Ojibwe</b>            Mathó  Makwa</p>
<p><b>Eagle</b>  <b>Dakota</b>                      <b>Ojibwe</b>            Wanmdí  Migizi</p>	<p><b>Crane</b>  <b>Dakota</b>                      <b>Ojibwe</b>            Pehánsan  Ajijaak</p>
<p><b>Deer</b>  <b>Dakota</b>                      <b>Ojibwe</b>            Tahca  Waawaashkeshi</p>	<p><b>Turtle</b>  <b>Dakota</b>                      <b>Ojibwe</b>            Kéya  Mishiike</p>

***The Friends of Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge is a 501c(3) nonprofit organization whose mission is to nurture an appreciation for, and the conservation of, Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge through education, volunteerism, and philanthropy. Find us at ExploreSherburne.org.***



*This project is made possible in part by the voters of Minnesota through a grant from the Central MN Arts Board, thanks to a legislative appropriation from the arts and cultural heritage fund.*