## Iti Fabussa

Shell Gorgets | Beautiful works stand as a testament to high level attained in early Choctaw art

Every Labor Day, Choctaw

artists display their work in

at Tvshka Homma. Even a

makes it clear that our Tribe

people. These abilities have

has many creative and artistic

not arisen overnight, but have

causal visit to this event

come out of a very deep

tradition. Choctaw people

who lived before European

intricate, and highly skilled

arrival made many beautiful,

1915:324), these gorgets were

carved from large, flat pieces

of shell, with holes drilled

through them so that they

could be strung and worn

a plain disk of shell, but

with delicate cutouts and

from the neck as a pendant.

Some gorgets are as simple as

others are highly embellished

engraved designs. To look at

one of these masterworks of

art is to appreciate it, however

this appreciation is deepened

in considering the ingenuity and patience that the artisans

the annual Choctaw art show

Figure 1. Pickett-style gorget made by author

pieces of artwork. Today, it is rare to see these early pieces, because most of them have returned to the earth from which their raw materials came. One exception are beautifully executed shell gorgets. Made from durable material, some of these ancient pieces still survive. Today, these beautiful works stand as a testament to the high level attained in early Choctaw art.

Known as "shaha" in the Choctaw language (Byington

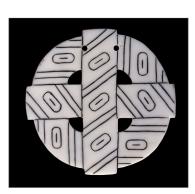


Figure 2. Oktibbeha-style gorget made by author

employed to make these objects from tough materials without the use of power tools or even metal tools.

Shell gorgets have been made for several thousand years in the American southeast, but the art came into full flower during the two centuries before European arrival (Brain and Phillips 1996:1-2). Many of the gorgets were made according to regional styles. Although quite a bit of variability existed between different regional styles, the gorgets within each specific style are very similar to each other. Three different gorget styles were made in the Choctaw homeland right before European arrival. Scholars have labeled these the Pickett style (Fig. 1), the Oktibbeha style (Fig. 2), and the Tibbee Creek style (ibid. 26-27, 32-33). After European contact, plain undecorated gorgets became the most common style in Choctaw country. However, Choctaws also continued to make a few engraved shell gorgets. One example with an engraved stylized owl design dating to around 1900 is in

the collection of the National Museum of the American Indian. Owl designs are not very common on gorgets, and this piece probably belonged to a Choctaw alikchi.

Ancestral Choctaw artisans utilized both freshwater mussel shells from local rivers (see Iti Fabvssa 1/13) and marine shells from the ocean as raw materials for making gorgets. The most commonly used marine shells came from the whelk, specifically from the genus Busycon (Fig. 3). Choctaw artisans probably referred to these Busycon shells as "shaha toba" (Byington

1915:324, also see Thompson 2008:458). The Busycon species used for gorgets produce light-colored spiraling shells as great as 18 inches in length. This material was so highly prized that Native communities traded it all the way from the west coast of



Figure 3. Three views of a **Busycon shell** 

Florida, where it was obtained, up to the Canadian provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan (e.g. Montgomery 1908:38-39), a distance of roughly 1700 miles!

Making a shell gorget is not a task to be undertaken lightly. Busycon shell is extremely hard, tough, and is even somewhat resistant to heat. One hundred thirty years ago, an anthropologist wryly marveled:

Let anyone who thinks lightly of such a work undertake, without machinery or well-adapted appliances, to cut a groove or notch even, in a moderately compact specimen of Busycon, and he will probably increase his good opinion of the skill and patience of the ancient workman if he does nothing else (Holmes 1883:286).

Gorgets were made from the outer part, or whorl of the Busycon

shell. This part is removed from the rest of the shell by hitting it very hard but very carefully with a tough, round rock. Each blow removes a small chip of shell. If the blows are aligned sequentially, they can be used to cut the whorl away from the rest of the shell (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. Left: Busycon shell with a cut being made in it; Center and Right: the shell with the whorl removed

After the removal of the whorl, both Busycon and freshwater mussel shell were worked with basically similar processes and tools. First, the shells had to be made into a roughly even shape. This was often done by dipping a flake of tough stone in wet sand, and sliding it back and forth over the surface of the shell (Fig. 5).



Figure 5. Stone saw being used to cut mussel shell

by grinding on a sandstone slab. Plain-style gorgets were made by grinding the shell into a smooth, circular or oval shape and then drilling two holes for stringing it on a necklace (Fig. 7). Some of the more fancy gorgets had fenstreations, or cutouts made into them. This was done by first drilling round holes in the shell (Fig. 8) and then shaping the holes by using a rough-edged flake of stone to saw back and forth within the holes to make them the

> desired shape.

Engraving

was done

using the



Figure 7. Plainstyle Busycon shell gorget, made by the author with only stone tools

Each stroke ground away a small amount of material. When the sand fell off, more was added. Making major cuts with this technique took hours of patient work. After the general shape of the gorget had been roughed out by cutting (Fig. 6), its edges were finely shaped



Figure 6. Mussel shell after cuts are complete

same tool, carefully sawing it back and forth over the slick, interior surface of the shell to cut in the designs (Fig. 9). The engraved designs show up better if they are painted (Fig. 10).

Today, the meaning that some of the ancient gorgets had to their makers and owners is not fully known. While interpretations exist for many of the symbols incorporated into the gorget

designs, they will not be discussed here. Together, the symbols on some gorgets may tell stories from early oral history, or symbolize the accomplishments of their owners or the tasks that they were responsible for doing. Beyond whatever other meanings they had, these gorgets were also highly valued items of personal adornment and expression. In the early 1700s, one shell gorget was worth four tanned deer hides in trade (Lawson 1714).

Today, some gorget artists from other southeastern Tribes are well known and highly respected for their work. Several



Figure 9. Engraving a design with a stonetipped tool

just waiting to take off again in the Choctaw community.

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http://www.choctawnationculture.com/ choctaw-culture/iti-fabvssa. If you have a question about Choctaw history or culture, please email to biskinik@ choctawnation.com.



**Figure 8. Drilling** holes with a stonetipped drill with a river cane shaft

people are experimenting with shell carving and making a few gorgets. With the inherent beauty of the shell, the deep tradition of gorget making among Choctaw artisans, and the possibility of making some amazing new traditional works of

art, the ancient art of gorgetmaking is

Choctaw



Figure 10. Oktibbeha-style gorget made by the author with only stone tools