



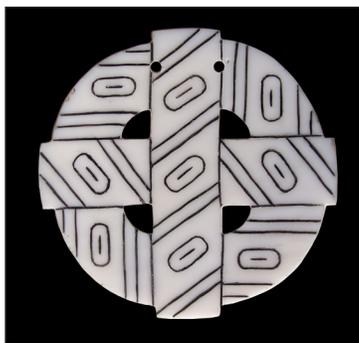
# Shell Gorgets | Beautiful works stand as a testament to high level attained in early Choctaw art



**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 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 from the neck as a pendant. Some gorgets are as simple as a plain disk of shell, but others are highly embellished with delicate cutouts and 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 employed to make these objects from tough materials without the use of power tools or even metal tools.



**Figure 2. Oktibbeha-style gorget made by author**

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

Every Labor Day, Choctaw artists display their work in the annual Choctaw art show at Tvshka Homma. Even a casual visit to this event makes it clear that our Tribe has many creative and artistic people. These abilities have not arisen overnight, but have come out of a very deep tradition. Choctaw people who lived before European arrival made many beautiful, intricate, and highly skilled

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

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

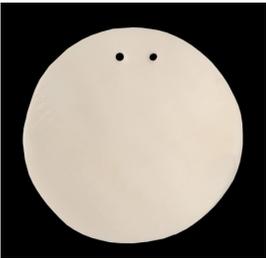


**Figure 5. Stone saw being used to cut mussel shell**

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 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 fenestrations, 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 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).



**Figure 7. Plain-style Busycon shell gorget, made by the author with only stone tools**

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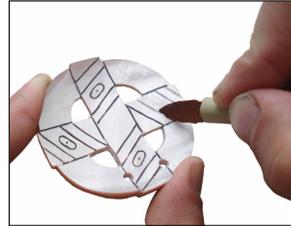
**Figure 6. Mussel shell after cuts are complete**

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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).

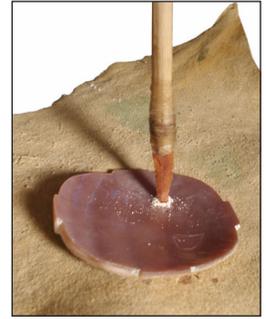
Today, some gorget artists from other southeastern Tribes are well known and highly respected for their work. Several



**Figure 9. Engraving a design with a stone-tipped tool**

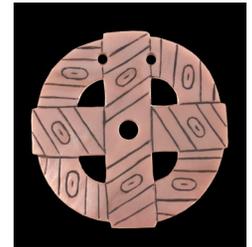
Choctaw people are experimenting with shell carving and making a few gorgets. With the inherent beauty of the shell, the deep tradition of gorget making among Choctaw artisans, and the possibility of making some amazing new traditional works of art, the ancient art of gorget-making is just waiting to take off again in the Choctaw community.

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**Figure 8. Drilling holes with a stone-tipped drill with a river cane shaft**

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