

## Tipi

***Summary:** Historically, the tipi was used as a home, social space, and ceremonial structure. The tipi's construction, shape, and accompanying art also served to represent humanity's relationship with the natural and spiritual worlds. Today, few Native Americans live in tipis, but tipis are still used for contemporary ceremonial gatherings and as symbols for Native American identity.*

Most Americans are familiar with the conical *tipis* of the Native peoples of the Great Plains. The *tipi* captured the popular imagination as the picturesque and practical dwelling of nomadic buffalo-hunters. The Blackfeet, Crow and Cheyenne peoples all had distinctive styles of *tipis*, recognizable by the placing of the poles or the shape of the smoke vent. But for all, the *tipi* was not only a highly functional home. It was also a social space and a ceremonial structure, its construction and form a powerful symbol of Native identity.

*Tipis* were designed for a people whose economy and lifestyle were nearly always on the move. Portable and quickly assembled, a *tipi* was built by stretching buffalo hides over a lashed frame of shaved poles, anchored to the ground with stakes. The circular structure was often slightly ovoid to brace the frame against prevailing winds. An inner liner of hide, known as a “dew cloth,” served to keep the interior dry and created a buffer, sometimes insulated with grasses, against the cold. A system of flaps and vents enabled a fire to be kept near the center of the circular interior for warmth, light, cooking, or ceremonial uses. In warmer months, flaps could be opened at the base to make for a shaded area with a comfortable breeze.

The traditional *tipi* was not only an efficient structure, but also a symbolic expression of humanity's relationship with the natural and spiritual worlds. Especially in the case of ceremonial *tipis*, the process of obtaining hides and poles was and is shaped by prayer and ritual guidelines. Symbols and story drawings were often painted on both the interior and exterior of the *tipi*, and these drawings were often the expression of visionary experiences. Like the Buddhist *stupa* or the Hindu *mandir*, the space created by the *tipi* is itself symbolic of the wider cosmos: time and the seasons, space and the four directions are associated with the circular floor space of the *tipi*. In its circle are structured many of life's activities, from

the most mundane to the most sacred. The circle of the *tipi* is a profound symbol of the interdependence of all of life for the Indians of the Great Plains.

For much of each year, Lakota formed a traditional social unit known as a *tiyospaye* or “camp circle,” also called the “sacred hoop.” The *tiyospaye* consisted of a number of *tipis*—some domestic, some social, and some ceremonial—laid out like the pattern of an individual *tipi* in a circle with an opening toward the east. At large ceremonial or social gatherings such as the Sun Dance, a number of *tiyospayes* would be laid out in this pattern as well. The social solidarity of the community was symbolically structured by the camp circle.

Today few Native people live in *tipis*, and the *tipis* that are erected are more often made of store-bought canvas than animal hides. Nonetheless, *tipis* remain powerful symbols of Native identity. *Tipis* often form the skyline of contemporary ceremonial gatherings among the Lakota and other Plains Indians. The peyote ceremonials of the Native American Church are usually held in special *tipis*. The Sun Dance ceremony of the Lakota and other Northern Plains peoples begins with the construction of a ceremonial *tipi*. Siting the *tipi*, selecting the sacred cottonwood pole, gathering the sage for the *tipi* floor, and raising the *tipi* are all ritual enactments integral to the performance of the Sun Dance.

The *tipis* one finds in use today range along the continuum from the utilitarian to the sacred. Some Native people keep *tipis* on the premises of their homes and ranches. *Tipis* can also be found in abundance at powwows and other community gatherings, and are frequently erected as powerful symbols of the abiding presence of Native people in the United States. Setting the poles and stretching the canvas of today’s *tipis* still requires the know-how of tradition. Those who erect *tipis* today have a rich appreciation for the sophistication and spiritual depth of this example of Native architecture.