

# Symbols: The Circle

Aboriginal people in North America use symbols to represent ideas that are important to them. Whole sets of ideas and feelings are represented by symbols. Symbols are used to explain concrete and abstract ideas found within Aboriginal cultures and help members of their societies to understand those ideas. One of the key symbols found in the Ojibwe culture is the circle.

The Ojibwe believe that everything in the universe is contained within a circle and everything has its place within that circle. The circle is used to express the holistic nature of their culture and the cyclic nature of everything around them. The circle is used to represent ideas such as the "circle of life" – strength, unity, and balance. The circle has no beginning and no ending – it is timeless.

The circle is used to describe different aspects of the physical world as well as of the spiritual world. In the physical world many things are, or appear to be, round, including the sun, moon, planets and stars; the trees, rocks, flowers and berries; bear dens, beaver lodges and muskrat houses; bird nests, spider webs, and fish eggs. All things follow the pattern of the circle. The sun, moon and planets move in a circle around one another. The sun rises in the east and sets in the west, and continuously "travels in a circle" around the world – it is always rising somewhere and always setting somewhere else. Similarly, the moon moves across the sky from east to west on a daily basis. The circle is used to illustrate the gradual passing of the seasons, from spring, to summer, fall, and winter. It is used to discuss the "circle of life" – how plants, animals,

birds, and fish are born, grow, mature, die, and how new life springs from them. It is used to describe the life cycle of humans from birth, growth, maturity, to death. The circle also illustrates the connections among family units, kinship relations, and the relationships among kin, neighbours and strangers.

In relation to the spirit world, the circle is used to describe how people are composed of a physical body, a spirit and a soul; how people live in the physical world, die, and then inhabit the spirit world; and how people are all descended from mythical ancestors. Informants indicate the Ojibwe believe that while they live in the physical world their spirits are capable of visiting and traveling around the spirit world when they are in a state of "unconsciousness," for example, when they are asleep, in a state of semi-consciousness or when they are "day-dreaming." They also believe that some people can move through these worlds at will. In order to do this they must have a special gift. Such a gift may have been given to a person during a vision quest, or the person may have acquired this ability through many years of learning. The Ojibwe believe while many people were able to do this years ago, few people have the ability to do so now because they have not taken enough time to learn the necessary skills. There are also few people who have the knowledge, experience and ability to teach these skills to others.

All things are interconnected, and are dependent on one another. Although everything has its own character and occupies a special place, each thing is dependent on everything else. This

interdependence is used to illustrate the unity of the Ojibwe universe – each thing forms a unique part of the whole and without one of the parts all of the others are affected. If damage is done to something in one section of the circle, it has an effect on something in another part of the circle. If there is an imbalance in one area, it causes an imbalance in other areas. Therefore there is a need to maintain and foster the relationships among all things. The circle, therefore, is used to represent all aspects of the physical and spiritual worlds of the Ojibwe.