

# COLLECTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

Pamunkey Gourds, Ethan Brown, 2022



## ERA

Early 21st  
Century

## THEMES

Indigenous,  
origin story,  
Pamunkey

## CITATION

Pamunkey  
Gourds 2022  
Ethan Brown  
R.39.2022  
Museum  
Purchase

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

1. What images do you notice on these gourds? What stories do the images tell?
2. How do these gourds represent the Pamunkey people and their legacy?
3. What can art tell us about our past?

## CONTEXT

The three gourds crafted by Pamunkey artist Ethan Brown visually depict a symbolic creation story set within the Paleo era (8,000 BCE) when humans first settled in Virginia and histories of two Pamunkey leaders, Cockacoeske (d. 1686) and Opechancanough (d. 1646). According to Brown, “taken together, these pieces tell a story of the original people of this land, the atrocities of colonization, and of resilience and survival.”

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## Artist Statement: Ethan Brown

I created these three gourd art pieces on a commission for the Valentine Museum. I am a Citizen of the Pamunkey Indian Tribe and reside on the Reservation in Virginia. As an artist I often make contemporary art pieces exploring various aspects of Pamunkey history and culture. I am drawn to this mixing of the contemporary and the traditional in my art practice. My process is based on intuition, with the natural mottling of the gourd's shell often suggesting the line drawing of the work. I start with a line drawing which I then burn into the shell of the gourd with a heated metal tool. Acrylic paints, oil stains, ink dyes, and varnish give color and finish off the work.

The first gourd I will highlight was inspired by Paleo life during the ice age in Virginia. I wanted to show that people have been living in this place for over 12,000-15,000 years. Three men use atlatls to hunt a mammoth. To their left a stone cave entrance suggests the stone quarries of the mountain region where the people would have been living- the stone so important for making the Clovis points necessary for survival. Through the cave I've imagined my rendition of a symbolic creation story of the people to come, which I've taken inspiration from a few different sources. Above the Creator comes from the rising sun carrying a magic pipe and a magic bag— which he keeps man and woman inside of. Above places man and woman into the world, which is turtle island, to live in harmony. Below, Okeech, a representation of the destructive forces, comes from the underworld. I repurposed some of the painted symbols from the painted cliffs in Virginia to help tell this symbolic story.

The next gourd was inspired by Opechancanough, and specifically by an event when he and 200 Pamunkey men were invited to an English fort to sign a peace treaty, and the wine was poisoned and they were shot. Poisoned and shot but able to escape, Opechancanough disappears from the historical record for years while recovering from this event, to come back years later to lead the second attack on Jamestown.

The third gourd was inspired by our female chief Cockacoeske, Queen of Pamunkey. She became Chief after her husband, Chief Totopotomoi was killed fighting for the English at the battle of Bloody Run near present day Richmond. The scene depicts her village being raided during Bacon's Rebellion in 1676, a time where we had previous peace treaties in place, and our warriors were allied with the English and fighting for them. Through the smoke of the scene we see Cockacoeske who would go on to reestablish peace and sign the treaty of Middle Plantation in 1677, setting in place the land, part of which has survived to our present day Reservation. Depicted with her is the silver frontlet which was given to her by England when she signed that treaty.

Taken together, these pieces tell a story of the original people of this land, the atrocities of colonization, and of resilience and survival.

Ethan Brown



