

# A Photographic Portrait Illustrating Mohave Adornment

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## Abstract

A circa 1880s studio portrait of a teenage Mohave girl appearing on an early twentieth century postal card underwent photographic restoration, thus allowing an artist to render an approximation of the painted design adorning the young woman's face. The photograph and artwork are shown and discussed in this article. Notes on facial decoration (painting and tattooing) and other kinds of body adornment are also provided.

In the decades bracketing the turn of the century, images of Native Americans were popular fare for *cartes de visite*, cabinet cards, stereoscopic cards, advertising ephemera, post cards, etc. An instructive example from the studio portrait genre graces an unused circa 1910 postcard (Figure 1) recently acquired at a stamp and vintage paper show. This collectible features a second generation photograph (not a halftone) of an adolescent Mohave. The studio sitting occurred probably around the mid 1880s, but certainly no later than the 1890s.

The teenager seen in Figure 1 lacked a chin tattoo; normally between ages 20 and 30 both sexes received *hakuich thompol*, or "mark chin" (Taylor and Wallace 1947:183). The young woman's hair style was common for female Mohaves—hair trimmed square above the eyes, the rest free flowing and spread over the shoulders (Kroeber 1925:729). Her hair appears glossy black, likely the result of applications of clay mixed with mesquite gum (see Kroeber 1925:729).

Multi-strand bead necklaces, some gorget-like, were typical Mohave women's jewelry. Notice that a metal

jew's harp (a.k.a. jaw harp) is suspended at midriff on three tethers attaching to the young woman's neck adornment. This kind of lyre-shaped musical device (its flexible tongue plucked while the frame is held against the teeth) was undoubtedly a popular amusement and/or decorative item along the lower Colorado River as several Mohave women and a Cocopah woman similarly display the simple instrument in late nineteenth century studio portraits (see Stewart 1983:63; Campbell 2007:105, 108, 109, 113; see also Alvarez de Williams 1983:103, Figure 5).

Traditionally, Mohave women went about uncovered above the waist. Like this teenager (Figure 1), they frequently wore a knee length skirt fashioned from the inner bark of willow. Skirts were occasionally overlaid with decorative cloth, and there were some skirts manufactured of twisted cloth and yarn strips (Stewart 1983:58, Figure 3, 59).

Mohaves were the most frequently face-painted Californians, particularly the young females who were motivated first by a desire to attract the opposite sex (Kroeber 1925:729; Taylor and Wallace 1947:190). The face seems to have been a fairly open canvas in terms of choosing the geometric elements and their placement to effect patterns, with the caveat that what appeared on one side of the face was more or less to be matched on the opposite side. Idealized illustrations of such are offered by Kroeber (1925:730, 732-733) and Taylor and Wallace (1947:189, 191) (or see Campbell 2007:147-149, 150[a, b, c]).



Figure 1. Postal card image of a face-painted Mohave girl. Photographic restoration by Doug Westfall.

Assuming that Native pigment adorned our maiden and not some commercial colorant purchased from a white trader, her non-symbolic, geometric display likely developed from finger applications of pulverized red ochre that had been kneaded into deer fat and subsequently warmed in a pot sherd (see Taylor and Wallace 1947:187). The red colorant would have been obtained from the Walapai, while the grease would have been secured from either Walapai or Yavapai. Black paint was verboten for females' face painting per se, however, a small amount of black applied as mascara using a tiny

stick was permissible "to make the eyes look large or the eyelashes long, and also to reduce the intense glare of the desert sun" (Taylor and Wallace 1947:193). White colorant was reserved for hair, torso, arms and legs.

It would not have been unusual had the young lady decorated her face daily or nearly so, at times employing a mirror ("shallow dish filled with water darkened with ground-up charcoal"). Alternatively, a friend or relative could have applied the paint (see Taylor and Wallace 1947:190).

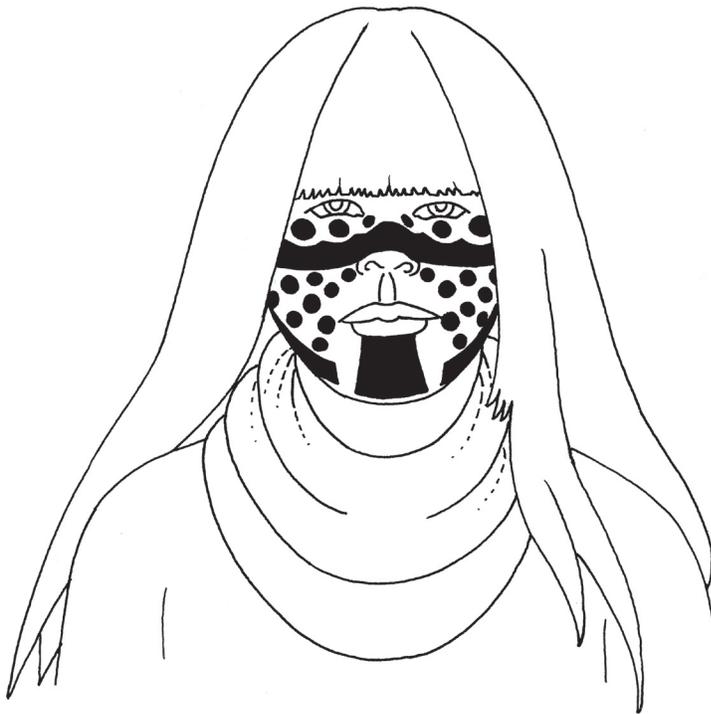


Figure 2. Rendition of face painting design by Joe Cramer. After photograph of Figure 1.

As evident from Figure 1, the facial art is easier to distinguish on her right side, while the left appears somewhat washed out. Doug Westfall, owner of Paragon Press, undertook photographic restoration, beginning with retouching on a computer screen, after which he flattened out the image. Contrast was then increased to better reveal the facial markings, yet there remained some difficulty in making out the paint pattern on the left half of the face. Artist Joe Cramer subsequently rendered an impression of the right side and flipped it to the left, such treatment justified by the Indians' propensity for side-to-side symmetry in tattooing and face-painting. The outcome of the combined talents of Westfall and Cramer is the reconstruction of Figure 2.

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