

# Women in Archaeology



Can you tell which of these artifacts belonged to men or women? Also, who made them?

Archaeologists study the human past by looking at the things people left behind to understand how they lived, worked, and how they related to one another. Women have played a vital role in every culture. The home has been the domain of women for many cultures through time. We must look at gender roles objectively, remaining cautious of undeserving stereotypes.



In prehistoric times, it has been commonly thought that the men hunted and the women stayed close to home gathering and cooking food and working leather hides. With this in mind, it is presumed that men knapped to make stone tools, i.e. spear points, knives, and arrowheads. Then who made the scrapers, awls, axes, mortars, and pestles? These artifacts are

associated with domestic activities-women's work. Many tools are made on the spot, modified for a specific purpose. Starting around 1000 B.C., pottery was used to cook and store food denoting a less nomadic lifestyle. Were the women potters or did some of the men specialize in this activity?

Grave goods provide a close look at the objects associated with an individual. These objects can give clues to the individual's trade or skill, such as an expert knapper, hunter, or potter. However, grave goods are also a product of the whole community or culture. Prehistoric men and women have been buried with equal frequency of spear points, knives, mortars, and pestles as was the case at a site in California (Classen). These items can also show what the people would need during or after life.

Animals and people have been portrayed through figurines and effigies through time. The "Venus" of Willendorf, a symbol of fertility (image upper right), was found in Austria dating to around 20,000 BCE. Men and women have been portrayed through figurines (image



left), effigy pipes, engraved tablets, and mica cutouts found at Adena and Hopewell sites (700 B.C through 500 A.D.) in the Ohio Valley (Swartz). Art and sculpture continues to depict hair and clothing styles, types of

adornments, facial images, posture, activities, gender roles, and beliefs even today as seen in the cabaret bronze sculpture (image lower right).



The home showed not just activities but also social and economic implications in historic times as well. Everybody uses dishes but even something that seems so mundane can tell us quite a bit. Homes with more bowls might imply that the diet consisted of more stews, while more plates perhaps indicated more meat was served at the dinner table, a sign of greater wealth. An abundance of different pattern designs and types of

vessels, such as saucers, cups, pitchers, etc., demonstrate a focus on social entertaining. The china one displays in one's home can be a sign of economic or social standing.

Other artifacts found in domestic settings, apart from architectural materials (brick, nails, window glass, etc.), are related to clothing, jewelry, hygiene, and crafts/trades. Buttons, hooks & eyes, and buckles were worn by both men and women. Straight-edges and combs tended to belong to men, while earrings, broaches, brushes, hat pins, corset pins, etc. tended to be used by women. A woman's deodorant label from the early 1900s was found at Ransom Place in Indianapolis.



Sewing, tatting, and knitting are typically associated with women's activities, although there were plenty of men who could and had to sew. Sewing implements (scissors, thimbles, chatelains) have been found at archaeological sites. Even a sewing machine has been found at colonial Williamsburg. What about guns and trapping? How many women took up arms to defend their home or to hunt and trap in the days of early settlement? Gun parts and ammunition show up on some historic sites. The image above (right) shows a double spring trap found at a 1840s homesite in eastern Indiana.



Most toys were made of cloth and wood that would not survive in the archaeological record, but pieces would. Dolls' faces (image right), legs, and arms were often ceramic. Parts of toy guns and cars were made of metal (image left) have been found at Ransom Place in Indianapolis. Marbles were made from various materials: wood, clay, and then later glass.



What can artifacts tell us about a population as a whole? We can infer what their lives were like, the things they did, and what

they thought. Gender, economic, social, ethnic, and religious associations frame the larger picture of a culture or a community. These associations lead to more complex questions regarding the impacts that technology, division of labor, food production, and social hierarchy have on each other. Cultures (present and past) are dynamic, ever changing, and directly shape the world we live in.

For further information on gender studies, start with the following authors: Cheryl Classen, Margaret Conkey, Joan Gero, Brian Hayden, and Alice Kehoe.

Sources:

Classen, Cheryl (1992). *Gender in Archaeology, Exploring Gender through Archaeology: Selected Papers from the 1991 Boone Conference*. <http://www.anthro.appstate.edu/ebooks/gender/ch01.html>

Images:

Historic artifacts and double spring metal trap from Shrader Weaver, Indiana, IDNR-DHPA

Composite historic artifacts (black and white) at the Vyne, England, [http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-ar\\_e\\_vyne.pdf](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-ar_e_vyne.pdf)

Projectile points, Ground stone tools, man flint knapping, and woman with vessel, IDNR-DHPA

Yankeetown ceramic vessel, John Maxwell, IDNR

"Venus" of Willendorf," <http://witcombe.sbc.edu/willendorf/willendorfdiscovery.html>

Woman figurines from the Turner site, Ohio, <http://www.bsu.edu/web/01bkswartz/POR%20TRAIT.pdf#search=%22hopewell%20female%20effigies%22>

Cabaret bronze sculpture, <http://www.sculptureandstatue.com/N68.html>

Deodorant label, doll face, and toy gun, Ransom Place, Indianapolis, Indiana, <http://www.iupui.edu/~anthpm/cal>

Sewing items, <http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/friendlessfemale/significance.html>

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