

Dream Catcher Tutorial

History

Dream catchers are associated with Native American tribes. The traditional function of Dream catchers was to catch and trap the bad dreams, while allowing the good dreams to pass through the eye of the web or to gently flow down the soft feathers to the dreamer. Dream catchers were hung so that they could swing freely in the air. Poorly constructed dream catchers would not only not achieve the intended purpose, but would also have the potential to actually harm the unwary dreamer. The size of the hoop, shape of the web, materials used, and placement of the hole were very important. Before use, dream catchers were sometimes 'cleansed' in a purification ceremony, in which they were passed through the smoke of smoldering sage.

"Accurate" historical accounts and traditional lore vary widely. This tutorial does not attempt to create an "authentic" dream catcher (if such a thing can truly be defined anymore), but endeavors to show people how to create a fine decorative and potentially spiritual craft. We believe that the determination of whether it is an authentic or spirituality significant work, lies in the heart and soul of the creator. It is important to understand that the dream catcher, for many people is neither art, nor decoration, but heritage.

Materials

The Ring

Typically a metal ring is used. They are available in a wide range of diameters. Natural materials can also be used, such as the traditional willow, or basket reed, wisteria vine, kudzu... Rings of natural materials will need to be bound in some fashion. They are often easier to work with, if soaked before bending. A thorough soaking makes them much more pliable, and generally easier to work with. Traditionally, dream catchers were quite small, perhaps 4 inches in diameter, though they are commonly much larger today.

Wrapping

The ring can be wrapped with a variety of materials. Colored cloth is one option. Rings made from natural materials need not be wrapped at all. It is a matter of personal preference.

Feathers

The original purpose of the feather was to help guide the flight of the good dreams to the sleeper. Their use was required and placement was very important. Today, artisans use feathers to suit their modern interpretations of the traditional craft. Historically, an owl's feather signified wisdom, and an eagle's feather represented courage. If you gather fallen feathers, take care in your judgment. Onerous Federal regulations decree that the mere possession of many types of feathers is a crime.

Embellishments

Traditional Native American dream catchers would not have used 'embellishments' as they are modernly known. Everything associated with a dream catcher had a specific purpose, and wasn't just added because it 'looked good'. Of course, there is no reason what-so-ever that each object you choose to add to your own dream catcher can't have its own special and spiritual significance.

In addition to feathers, beads and gemstones can also be added. Personal mementos could also be incorporated into the design. Leather can be used very effectively.

Glue

A bit of glue can make things much easier if you are not yet comfortable with your ability to make knots that will hold fast. Using a heavier/thicker white glue that dries clear (and more quickly) will suffice. Applying it with a pin, needle, or toothpick, should help you to use a minimum amount, and only in the place(s) where it is needed. A hot-glue gun is very quick and easy to use, but it can be much harder to conceal the use of hot-glue. Traditionally, glue, if used, would have been homemade hide glue. Typically, this would have been made with deer or elk. Our recommendation is to avoid the use of glue when possible, but if needed, to go ahead and use it judiciously.

Preparing the Ring

First, the size and type of ring should be selected. A metal ring is the easiest to work with, but it must be wrapped. Artificial sinew is a wonderful material for this purpose. It comes in a good variety of colors and is a good choice for wrapping. Artificial sinew can be a bit tedious to use on a large ring. In that situation, a cloth wrap might be a good choice.

For a 4 inch diameter ring, try working with an 8-foot length of artificial sinew. For larger rings, experiment to determine the length needed. It is generally quite easy to wrap even a large ring with a single length. Artificial sinew has an added benefit in that it is generally easier to hide a 'join', than some other materials, should an extra length be needed.

Before beginning to wrap the ring, decide whether you want to add the hanging loop with this length of sinew, or to add it later in the process of making the dream catcher. If you want to include the hanging loop with the wrapping, start by tying on to the ring, forming a loop the desired length, and taking a couple of wraps to secure the loose 'leg' of the loop.

Another choice for adding the hanging loop is to end the wrapping with the formation of the hanging loop, knotting the loop in place, and then leaving the 'tail' of the knot free, in order to later add decorative elements such as beads, shells, or feathers.

Proceed, in either direction, to carefully wrap the ring, keeping the tension even, and slightly overlapping each successive turn. Materials other than artificial sinew may not be able to overlap as cleanly, and be more difficult to use.

Artificial sinew has a sometimes frustrating tendency to curl or twist when used as a wrap. (This is not an issue when making the dream catcher web.) This characteristic can make handling tedious. Wrap the length of sinew on an empty sewing thread spool or a short length of large-diameter dowel rod. By first carefully wrapping the sinew flat on the spool, the twisting problem is remedied, and provides the added benefit of greater leverage while pulling the length taut as it is used.

The Web

If a hanging loop was not added when wrapping the ring, or if the ring was not wrapped, the loop should be added before making the web. Carefully knot the loop into place, and cut off the excess, or leave a short length to which embellishments can be added later.

For a small 4 inch ring, begin with about a 7 foot length of artificial sinew. Unlike the wrapping of the ring, you will not be concerned about maintaining the width or flatness of the sinew and thus might prefer working with a split length. Splitting artificial sinew is very easy. The advantage to doing this is that a much finer thread can be used. To split, take the cut length, and from one end peel the sinew into about half. Gently split the sinew along its full length. With care, this can actually be repeated several times. Practice on a short length to get a feel for the technique.

When creating the web, you can use the loose end of the sinew or, as is easier for some people, thread it on a needle, which will make it easier to handle. If using a loose end, it is sometimes helpful to prevent the end from fraying or splitting. Heating the end with a match will melt the material, and it will not fray or split.

Cultural Note

Deer sinew would have been the most common material for creating the web of an "authentic" dream catcher. It can still be obtained through suppliers of natural products, or businesses that cater to people with an interest in primitive skills. It does however require some commitment before it can be used successfully. It requires a practiced skill and dedication to use. Genuine deer sinew (or elk) does not come on a convenient roll, in 9 colors, and in one continuous length. It comes in a dry hard hunk of animal sinew, which requires skill and patience to work with.

It is because of this, and similar considerations, that many Native American 'purists' take exception to the main stream adoption of the sacred dream catcher. There are deep concerns that people who do not make dream catchers in the great tradition, with an understanding for why and how they were made, do not have the proper respect for the depth of spiritual significance. Turtle Feathers believes that all views on the subject of tradition, spirituality, art, and the inseparable link between them, deserve respect.

Making the Web

Step 1

From the starting point (the join of the loop), bring the length of sinew over the front/top of the ring...

The first row of the web will have the largest spacing, and the spacing for each succeeding row will become a bit smaller. The size of the web is left entirely to the discretion of the artisan. For a 4 inch diameter ring, begin with spacing of 1-2 inches. Although reasonably uniform spacing is recommended, the effect you are trying to achieve may necessitate irregular spacing. As with all art, if the effect pleases you, then you are doing it correctly.

Step 2

Then bring the length, from the back, just under the ring, keeping it above the 'loop' you are creating...

Step 3

Snug this loop (generally referred to as a half-hitch) firmly into place, keeping the half-hitch loop just at and below the ring.

If this seems confusing at first, stick with it. The dream catcher uses the same half-hitch stitch over and over again. Once you 'get' it, it's off to the races.

Step 4

Repeat steps #2 and #3, working around the ring, until you are ready to close the last loop of the first round. This loop will be about 1/2 the size of the previous loops.

Take care not to pull the stitches too tight; just snug them up. As each stitch is pulled, the stitch from the previous round will pull in slightly, forming a 'diamond' shape. When nearing the center, it is quite common to add a single bead, to represent the spider in the web.

Step 5

Make the closing stitch of the last loop of the first round, into the center of the first loop of the first round. Each succeeding half-hitch will be made into the middle of the next loop in the previous row. This will continue for as many rows as is required to complete the web.

Once comfortable with the process of creating the web, you may decide to add beads into the web as it progresses. Just thread them into place where ever your heart says they need to go.

Web Eye

The eye of the web can be as large or as small as you choose to make it. Generally, it is recommended that you make the half-stitch of the last loop at the bottom of the web, but this is your choice. When working with artificial sinew, a second half-hitch and a drop of glue (from the back) are sufficient to hold the finish in place.

Tips and Suggestions

Tip 1

Sometimes you will have a special stone that you really want to incorporate into the web but which will not lend itself to being drilled as a bead or pendant. Try cutting an appropriate length of light-weight fishing line. Then cut a small piece of fabric – felt is often used because it does not fray but other fabrics often work as well, if not better. Put glue on the back of the stone and make a stone 'sandwich' (stone with glue, fishing line, fabric). Results are not guaranteed, but if the glued stone surface is fairly smooth, often this will be successful. Try tying several knots in the fishing line before making your stone sandwich – sometimes this provides a little extra 'grab' so the line is less likely to pull through. As extra insurance for the line to stay in place, you can also 'sew' a small stitch into the fabric before gluing your sandwich.

Tip 2

The ends of single feathers, or groups of feathers, can be wrapped with sinew. This also provides the means a convenient means of attachment to the dream catcher. Splicing extra lengths of sinew into the wrapping is a great way to then add extra embellishments to the feathers. Use the extra loose ends as attachment points.

Tip 3

If the sinew's flat surface doesn't quite give the look you are looking for, it is very easy to narrow it, or round it off. Secure one end firmly. Put the other end in a drill. (A hand drill is best, but a power drill will work if care is taken.) Turn the drill slowly. As it takes twist, it will both narrow and round itself. The length will get shorter as it takes twist. It is essential to allow this. Too many turns will cause over twist. If it is not excessive, this is easily pulled out. This is an extremely quick process for tweaking the finished look of the dream catcher.

The text of this tutorial is owned by Turtle Feathers.