Plants of Ḥemnīčhan

Dakhóta Coloring Book

Inspired by the 1861 Minnesota journey of Henry David Thoreau

Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) is known for his masterpiece Walden (1854), a philosophical novel of living a life close to nature, based off the two years he spent in a small cabin at Walden Pond (Massachusetts) as an “experiment in simplicity”. Over the years, Walden has inspired and informed the work of naturalists, environmentalists and writers; some even call him the “father of environmentalism”. Thoreau was a Transcendentalist who connected spirituality through living as a relative to Nature. Dakota people have similar philosophical views such as the Sacred Hoop and Mitákuye Owás’íŋ (we are all related) which means our existence depends on a balanced, harmonic relationship with all things.

By immersing himself in Nature, Thoreau hoped to gain a more objective understanding of society through personal introspection. He was strongly against slavery, working in the underground railroad to help slaves escape to Canada. One of his most well-known essays “Civil Disobedience” argues that it is sometimes necessary to disobey the law in order to protest unjust government actions; it has inspired later civil rights movements led by Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi.

In 1861, the year before his death, Thoreau took a month long trip to the midwest and explored the area around the Twin Cities with his friend Horace Mann, Jr. He traveled along the Wakpá Tháŋka (Mississippi River), stopping in Bde Otȟa Otȟúŋwe (Minneapolis) and Iimnižaska Otȟúŋwe (St Paul); while there, he visited Owámniyomni (St. Anthony Falls), Wita Tópa (Lake of the Isles), Bde Makhá Ska (formerly Lake Calhoun), Bde Umán (Lake Harriet), Mní Ihnáppiyan (Minnehaha Falls), and Bdoté (Pike Island). He traveled down the Mnísota Wakpá (Minnesota River) and saw the Dakota people at the Lower Sioux Agency; he rightly predicted in his journal that their mistreatment by the US government would lead to a war (Dakota War of 1862).

Before returning to his home in Massachusetts, he climbed Ḥemnīčhan (Barn Bluff) where he read his mail, wrote in his journal of the natural beauty of Tháŋka Bdé (Lake Pepin) and ate Wažúšteča (wild strawberries). His journals offer scientific and poetic studies of the indigenous plants he saw growing throughout his Minnesota journey. This coloring book of Dakota plants of Ḥemnīčhan is inspired by his writings which I have illustrated using the floral artistic-style of Dakota people to create something that together combines our connections to Nature.

Illustrations by Marlena Myles
(Sisíthunwáŋ-Wahpétunwáŋ of the Spirit Lake Dakota Tribe) | © 2019 https://marlenamyl.es
Phaṛṇūpada
Common Milkweed (Asclepias Syriaca)

Infusion of whole plant is used as calming medicine. Young shoots can be eaten in soups or stews. Flower buds are also edible. The name can translate to "the two little workbags of women" which refers to the milkweed pod.
Čhaŋphá
Chokecherry (Prunus Virginiana)

July is known as Čhaŋphásapa Wi, the month when chokecherries ripen. Čhaŋphá are a well-known fruit to Dakota people and an important stable in traditional diets. It is ground into meat patties (pemmican) known as Wasná, as well as being boiled into a berry pudding known as Wóžapi. The wood (Čhaŋpháhu) is used to create arrows.
Hokšíčhekpa
Pasque Flower (Anemone Patens)

One of the first flowers of Spring to bloom, there are many songs in Dakota about the beauty and the joy of seeing the first Hokšíčhekpa.

A long time ago, she was all white. A young man came to a hill to pray for a vision in the late winter. He covered himself with his buffalo robe and heard a little voice say, "Thank you!" and he was surprised to see it was a little white flower speaking as she warmed herself.

The two kept each other company, watching the yellow sun rise over purple mountains while he waited in prayer; meanwhile, the little flower gave the young man constant encouragement. Finally, one night, the Morning Star rose to give him his vision. As a gift to the flower for keeping the man company, Morning Star gave the white flower three wishes: she wished for a heavy robe of her own to keep warm, the color purple for her dress and the warmth of the golden sun as her heart. To this day, when the Hokšíčhekpa blooms in the early chilly spring, the little purple flower greets the world with her golden heart.

She is considered the grandmother flower (Wánáhča Unči) as she is the first to appear. She addresses the other flowers as grandchildren.
Unžíŋžíŋŋta
Prairie Rose (Rosa Arkansana)

A long time ago, the blanket which covered Unčí Makhá (Grandmother Earth) was deserted and held no beauty. The cause was Tatéiyumní (Whirlwind), who had it for his playground. He made Unčí Makhá sad and angry: “There are flowers in my heart and oh I wish they could make my blanket beautiful. Ugly Tatéiyumní!”

Whenever a flower from her heart would go up, Tatéiyumní would rush for the flower saying, “What business has she in my playground of dust and storms?” And he would blow out her life.

At last Unčí Makhá’s most darling flower went up onto her blanket. This time, however, Tatéiyumní rushed upon her crying, “How sweet her breath is! And her dress is beautiful. I like her. It is not in my heart to blow out her sweet life. She may have part of her playground for her home and I shall name her Unžíŋžíŋŋta.”

Other flowers came and Tatéiyumní liked them and became gentler. Then the grasses and trees came, and Tatéiyumní played with them and became still more gentle.

So the Dakota put the pink colors of Unžíŋžíŋŋta on their clothing to remind Tatéiyumní of his first love for Unžíŋžíŋŋta in hopes he becomes too gentle to harm people.
Ptetháwote
Ground Plum (Astragalus Crassicarpus)

Her name means "food of the buffalo" and Dakota people believe she is also good medicine for horses. Legumes of Ptetháwote are eaten; however, there are poisonous fruits that resemble Ptetháwote, so it is highly recommended to not eat them if one is not an expert! Because she bears many fruits, Dakota people would placed her seeds in water in which seedcorn was soaking to make the corn more productive when planted.
Zuyá Phežúta
Silverweed/Silver Cinquefoil (Potentilla Anserina)

Her name refers to the plant being called “medicine to use against the enemy”. The whole plant or just the leaves is used as a calming tea. The roots are edible either cooked or raw.
Wahčázi
Stiff Sunflower (Helianthus Pauciflorus)

Oil used to condition the hair is created by boiling the whole plant after the seeds are eaten. The flower was formerly worn upon the chests as a medallion during the Sundance, instead of the four colors or symbols as seen today.

They are respected for their continuous prayers, as they follow the sun spirit Anpétu Wi’s journey across the sky. Thus, anywhere Wahčázi grows is considered sacred ground.