Poverty and Property
Unit: Trade & Property (Middle and High School)

From *Lewis and Clark: Across the Divide* by Carolyn Gilman

Why could Lewis and Clark not see the affluence around them? There are several possible answers. Different cultures have different definitions of value. Lewis derided the Indians’ sense of value: “Their dispositions invariably lead them to give whatever they are possessed of no matter how useful or valuable, for a bauble which pleases their fancy, without consulting it’s usefulness or value.” And yet he and Clark nearly gave away the bulk of their dwindling trade goods in order to get three handsome otter pelts. Theirs was a value system ridiculed by the Indians. As one Hidatsa asked a trader in 1804: “What is the use of beaver? do they make gun-powder of them? Do they preserve them from sickness[?] Do they serve them beyond the grave?” In 1806 another trader wrote of the Hidatsa: “They put little value on any of those skins, and cannot imagine what use we make of such trash, as they call it. They . . . call the whites fools for giving them valuable articles for such useless skins.”

Many of the things prized by the Chinookans were symbolic of their strictly stratified class system, an aspect of their culture that Lewis and Clark never even suspected. Chinookan rank was hereditary; children of different classes were kept apart, and intermarriage was forbidden. Wealth was the outward expression of class, and certain styles of dress and appearance were limited to the upper echelons. The custom of head-flattening, which Clark described but never got an explanation for, was in fact a badge of aristocracy. Slaves were forbidden to flatten their children’s heads. To the Chinookans, the captains’ round heads were a symbol of servility as sure as York’s black skin was to Virginians. Another symbol of high status was copper, formerly imported from the Alaskan coast. The shiny brass-and-copper bracelets, thimbles, bells, and wire described by Lewis as “articles of little value” were, to the Chinookans, symbols of wealth: they commanded a premium price for their prestige value, much as platinum watches or elite sportscars do today, regardless of their utility.

Wealth not only was symbolized differently but also was used differently. European men and women achieved status and power by accumulating and keeping wealth. The Chinookans, like other Native Americans, achieved status and power by giving their wealth away. Anyone who aspired to chieftainship was obliged to demonstrate generosity to the point of impoverishing himself, if necessary. European visitors found it strange that chiefs were often so poor in goods. They did not see how rich the chiefs were in community support.