Wampum belt, 18th century
Probably Iroquois (Handenosaunee) artist
**Wampum belt, 18th century**
Probably Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) artist
Shells and leather
Gift of New England Historic Genealogical Society
E39.383

**Historical Context**
The word "Wampum" comes from the Narragansett word for “white shell beads,” although the beads are made in two colors. Wampum are commonly formed into small, disk or cylindrical shapes made from Atlantic coast shells with white (whelk shell) and purple (quahog) coloring. These beautiful beads were threaded into strings or woven into patterned belts, which were used as “a symbolic and documentary medium. Among the Iroquois, wampum strings functioned as mnemonics for reciting ritual speeches, while belts of wampum solemnized intertribal communiqués and commemorated councils and treaties” ¹

The size and weaving practices of Wampum production changed over time. Some examples dating back as far as 200 A.D., for example, were larger and featured larger holes that were bored using stone tools. After contact with Europeans, Native Americans took advantage of available metal tools and produced smaller beads with narrower holes. The cultural use of Wampum also began to change after Native American/European contact. Because specie was scarce in the New England colonies, settlers adapted Wampum into their economic traditions, using strings of Wampum as a form of monetary exchange. Narragansetts and Pequots produced Wampum to meet this market need, and Europeans produced beads during the 18th century as a specialized industry.

**Art Historical Context**
“Belts made mainly from white beads suggest cordial diplomacy, while those that made extensive use of purple (sometimes referred to as “black” beads) have more sober connotations. The meaning of the belt shown here, which is predominantly purple with ten white cross-filled hexagons, is now lost, but it bears faint traces of red paint on some of the beads and fringe. Belts marked with red were understood as a call to war.”²

Woven belts such as this example are more common after Native American/European contact, when Wampum production increased.

**Sample Guiding Questions**
- Describe the patterns and colors that you see in this belt.
- How do you think the patterns and colors helped people to remember and honor particular events or treaties?
- How would this have been different from the ways that European settlers remembered or honored similar events or agreements?
- In what ways do we solemnize important agreements today? Are there things produced to remember these occasions? Where are they kept?

**Suggested Learning Activities**
- Ask students to draw their own object to remember a particular agreement or event.

² Ibid: 105. 

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