

Gorgets

In Europe, the term *gorget*—derived from the French *gorge*, meaning “throat”—originally referred to a band of linen wrapped around a woman’s neck and head during the medieval period, or to the lower portion of a simple chaperon hood. Over time, the term evolved to encompass various forms of throat protection, including steel or leather collars, assemblies of plate armor, or a single plate suspended from the neck to protect the throat and upper chest.

By the eighteenth century, the gorget had undergone a gradual transformation from functional armor into a largely symbolic object. It diminished in size and assumed a crescent shape, worn on a chain that allowed it to hang progressively lower on the chest. As a result, it no longer served a practical defensive purpose when worn in the customary manner. Instead, the gorget became primarily ornamental. This form was frequently used as a trade item distributed to Native American communities and also persisted as a symbolic element of military dress, signifying rank and authority. In some military traditions, this ceremonial use has endured into the modern era. Such gorgets appear in numerous eighteenth-century paintings of military figures across Europe and colonial America, including well-known depictions of George Washington.

In the Americas, the earliest known use of gorgets as ornamental neck-hung objects signifying status or rank predates European contact by thousands of years. Archaeological evidence from mound-building cultures of Eastern North America reveals gorgets crafted from shell, stone, and copper. While it may be an overstatement to argue that this longstanding tradition directly predisposed Native American peoples to adopt European metal gorgets, the existence of earlier indigenous forms likely facilitated their acceptance. The transition can be viewed as broadly analogous to the replacement of stone or wooden tools with metal counterparts following sustained contact with Europeans.

During the American Revolutionary period, gorgets took the form of crescent-shaped ornamental metal plates worn by officers to indicate rank and duty status. The gorget depicted in Charles Willson Peale’s 1772 portrait of Colonel George Washington, for example, reflects its use during the French and Indian War, when Washington wore it as a visible symbol of his commission as an officer in the Virginia Regiment.



Continental officers also wore them, such as the example belonging to Lieutenant Alexander Hume, which featured American symbols and the motto "*Libertas. Portior. Vita*". The gorget is part of the Mount Vernon Collection.



Some American officers took captured British gorgets and modified them, such as one with the British royal arms scratched out and replaced with symbols of American independence.