

# WINDIGO WONDERING

by  
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Do a search of Windigo (or Wendigo) images on the internet and you will meet a vivid, fearsome, and at times humorous gathering of characters. The problem is that they are almost entirely made for modern popular consumption on video games, comic books, the fantasy art market, and the like. They bear little or no resemblance to the traditional Windigo portrayal.

In contrast, the American Museum of Natural History in New York City holds a rare amulet depicting Windigo, untitled at the time the writer/photographer viewed it behind glass, and with no information as to origin or description. (It is hoped that a follow-up visit may shed more light on this object).

The amulet depicts Windigo (the name has variant spellings depending on indigenous origin) in its more traditional rendering—albeit suggesting to this writer a curious superficial resemblance to Edvard Munch's, *The Scream*, and in general outline to the "Hairy Man" pictograph near Porterville, California.



Native Windigo amulet in the American Museum of Natural History, New York City.

The facial expression and mouth are, we believe, traditional Windigo motifs, and the presence of the corvid (crow or raven) should be expected. Dr. Jill Stefko and others have described the symbolism of crow as creator, trickster, shape shifter, and "entrance to the supernatural..."

Some indigenous stories mention the claws of the Windigo. Note the extreme curvature of the claws on the amulet.

Dr. Stefko, when seeing this photo, noted that "It's a curious amulet, with the colors. It should be red for protection and black, to banish and repel evil and negativity." The amulet is orange-red. The blue-green area is probably from surface wear. Undoubtedly some reader will be able to advise us on the vertical parallel motifs on either side of the body, and also the navel.

I asked Dr. Stefko whether or not the wearing of such an amulet would be restricted to a shaman. Her reply is that the amulet can be worn by anyone.

Windigo is frequently regarded as a kind of Eastern Sasquatch. An examination of the literature, however, does not lend itself to such an easy crossover or comparison. The stories of Native Americans / First Nations, as well as other writings, including psychological studies, present a much more complex and consistently frightening aspect. In spite of many paranormal or supernatural associations now expressed in print with Bigfoot/Sasquatch (one of the dividing and controversial issues with the subject), it seems evident that the malevolent, overwhelmingly fearsome aspect is more thoroughly consistent with the consideration of Windigo.

Based on the published stories I have studied, the following observations can be made: Windigo is always feared. Windigo is primarily ice, not flesh and blood. It is an “it,” possibly exclusively. Windigo is huge, fifteen or more feet tall. Windigo is often thin as bones, and starving. Windigo is most likely to be present in the dead of winter. Windigo usually does not have body hair.

At the same time, Windigo is a cannibal, and numerous indigenous peoples use cannibal synonyms for Sasquatch, as well as “devil.” Windigo is called a giant, as is Sasquatch. Windigo is said to have glowing red eyes. Several nocturnal Sasquatch sightings report the same. There is a regular transformation aspect with Windigo, as people fear “being Windigo” or “going Windigo.” In fact, one apparently has to temporarily become Windigo to destroy Windigo (with the hope of returning to the human state afterwards). Sasquatch literature reports some transformation process from man to creature if the former goes too deeply or too long into the wilderness. Windigo sometimes does leave big footprints. The icy heart and/or body of Windigo must be burned to ashes. Some indigenous stories tell how the threat of Sasquatch was only resolved when the threatening creature was burned to ashes—giving rise to annual clouds of mosquitos!

The literature of Windigo is widespread. A bibliography is not intended here, but as examples of widely varied sources, I cite Victor Barnouw's, *Wisconsin Chippewa Myths & Tales*, Herbert Schwarz's fine children's illustrated book, *Windigo and Other Tales of the Ojibways*, wonderfully illustrated by Norval Morrisseau, and even Margaret Atwood's essay, "Eyes of Blood, Heart of Ice: The Windigo," in her volume, *Strange Things – The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*. A search of Northwood's loggers' and miners' stories and memoirs, and the same from native peoples, may bear fruit. To that effect, Richard Dorson's, *Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers – Folk Traditions of the Upper Peninsula* (Michigan) contains a story by Mrs. Joseph Feathers, "Windigoes and Cupids."

When it comes to a Windigo connection with the Pacific Northwest, this writer is intrigued by three locations in close proximity to each other in Oregon. Lewis McArthur's, *Oregon Geographic Names* (6th edition) locates Windigo Butte, Windigo Pass, and Windigo Lake, in the high elevations of the Cascade Range north of Crater Lake, but does not know how they came to be there. I have speculated that the name(s) may have been brought by Great Lakes loggers who inevitably came to the virgin timber of the Northwest. When describing Windigo as legendary, huge, and fearsome cannibals, McArthur further refers the reader to William H. Keating's 1823 book, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River* (a western Great Lakes location). This volume references Cannibal or Wandigo Lake, and cites origin of the name from an act of cannibalism among a party of Indians facing famine in 1811.

In the meantime, while Windigo has multiple and multiplying new faces and bodies in all sorts of locations in modern fantasy culture, many of us are likely much more intrigued by the single image of horror and mystery on an amulet pinned behind glass in a famous museum.

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