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Shields of the Plains
Individualism and Collectivism in the Native American Plains Shield Custom

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The dress and the accouterments of the indigenous North American warrior have long been a topic of curiosity for outsiders. In popular culture, the plains warrior has often been romanticized, seen as a heroic and noble individual. Thus their apparel has been idealized and classified in the minds of most non-natives where it is seen only as an item that represents the visible culture. The paraphernalia of the plains warrior whose significance is often misunderstood, is the war shield. The shield of the Native American Plains warrior represents not only the culture, but contains world views of the tribe as well as the individual's experiences within those traditions. From the very ideas behind the creation of the shield, to the methods of making it, to the chosen designs, the process and custom is an embodiment of the individual's experience within a collective community.

The shield was originally designed as military equipment, but early on it became a religious object (Hämäläinen 42). There is evidence of early shields depicted in prehistoric rock art and on boulders across the continent ranging from the southwest through the plains into Alberta. These early shields were much larger however, since they were used before natives were introduced to horses (Hämäläinen 44). Research cannot reveal the exact evolution of the ideas concerning the shield as a spiritual protector, however, according to Plains Indian legend shields were derived during the mythic past (Hämäläinen 46). More recent shields, most made in the 19th century, have a more defined context, as there is photographic and written evidence of their creation and use. As Frederick Hoxie points out, "the shields of the Crow Indians made more than a century ago cannot be fully appreciated today without an understanding of what they meant to the warriors who carried them into battle" (Hoxie 73). This quote reiterates that the modern viewer is at a disadvantage in viewing these pieces of artwork, if one does not understand their context. This is not only true of Crow shields, but any plains shields. One

cannot fully comprehend their significance in plains societies without understanding the world and religious views of the natives.

As William and Clark observed, the shield making process was “one of their most important ceremonies” (Hämäläinen 42). This was because the Native Americans of the plains saw themselves as individuals who needed to gain direct contact with the spiritual forces in nature and shields became the visual representation of this connection. Imagery symbolized specific aspects of their religion, usually having connotations of one of the planes of existence. The Cheyenne, for instance, believed in a world with six cosmos’s (Nagy 42). The buffalo is placed on the level of the middle world, since it relates to earth, food, and shelter (Nagy 41). Imagery of buffalo and other animals, such as the turtle, or thunderbird, would have connotations to the specific cosmological level in which the animal was a part of. Seen in this context, imagery on specific shields would have different meanings, but the decorations on a man’s shield always proved his association with the creator (Hoxie 73).

The original shields were meant for physical protection but came to enter the war bundle, which contained various items that gave the owner spiritual power and protection in battle (Hämäläinen 46). The shield could easily deflect lances, or arrows, and even a smoothbore bullet shot at midrange (Mails 490). They were made of tough rawhide from the thick parts of buffalo hide. Even with their practical use, however, the shield was seen as spiritual protector. The Crow, especially, believed that the power of their shields went beyond its material form (Hoxie 73). They were infused with the natural cosmological powers of the spirit protector, and in this way were considered invincible (Hoxie 73). As stronger firearms became prevalent weapons in the midwest, the shields’ major function was to spiritually protect the bearer. This duality between the function and symbolism of the shield is evidence of the artwork’s

significance, not only as part of an individual's war regalia, but a reflection of the cultural views of the tribe.

In personal terms, shields were representations of a warriors' own specific vision. These visions were, in most cases, consciously sought after. Seen as a right of passage, the young warrior would go on a vision quest, which included going away from the village and fasting, usually for several days. During this time, a "spiritual protector" would reveal itself to the young man in a vision, which indicated the man's right to make a shield. These guardian spirits were "generally in the shape of birds or animals, and thus the figures were frequently found in the designs of the shields" (Hämäläinen 46). As Riku Hämäläinen points out, in his vision a man "not only became conscious of the cosmology, he was, moreover, to be involved in it" (Hämäläinen 46). The vision quest is a perfect example of the duality between individualism and collectivism within the shield construction. It was a custom practiced by many tribes, which involved contact with a common spiritual system. However, it was all about the individual's experience within the collective tradition.

Shamans, sometimes referred to as medicine men, played an important role in the interpretation of the vision, and thus the shields creation. The anthropologist Clark Wissler has pointed out that "in the shield design, the individual attempted to convey the idea of his vision in conformity with the conventional modes of representative art practiced by his tribe" (Hämäläinen 48). Often it was the medicine man who interpreted an individual's dream by "finding within it echoes of tribal cosmology" (Hämäläinen 48). Likewise, if the "visionary cannot fully explain his experience within the tradition of the reference group [tribe], it is the communities responsibility to offer a correct interpretation of the experience" (Hämäläinen 117). A warrior may make several shields in his lifetime, the shaman playing roles of different importance for

each (Mails 509). Sometimes the Shaman would actually construct the shield, other times they were only used for advice (Mails 490). The involvement of these members of a tribe in providing an alternative interpretation proves that an individual did not have complete freedom in his dream's comprehension, and thus his shield design. By offering these interpretations, the tribe was preserving a collective representation of its cultural views.

The actual creation of a rawhide shield was both time consuming and specific. One witness account describes the warrior making his shield, "on it he bestows infinite patience and thought. Not only must it be perfect in shape, in fit, in make, but also in its medicine. He thinks it over, he works it over, he prays over it, to its care and protection he commends his life" (Mails 486). After his vision quest, the young warrior would shoot an old male buffalo, remove the hide from its neck and shoulders (although some evidence suggests the hide was taken from the rump) and take the hide to a woman who would remove the fur. With the help of others, the bull hide was then stretched over a hot pit of rocks, where, after an hour it would shrink to about half its original size (two feet in diameter and one inch thick). An elder warrior or shaman would supervise the process. The warrior would then paint on the design (Mails 488). There have been varying accounts of who would complete the exact process. One Sioux, for instance, reportedly "secured and prepared the hide himself, and the symbols were applied by a medicine man" (Mails 490). After the shield was created, the warriors of the tribe would hang the shield on a tree and shoot arrows at it, testing its physical capabilities of protection (Mails 499). Clearly, since the creation of the shield involved many members of the tribe, including the young man, women, the shaman, and older warriors, its formation should be regarded as a collective pursuit.

Although it was necessary that the shield represent the individual warrior's vision quest, the imagery and items displayed on the shield, was ultimately up to the individual. As Colin

Taylor states, many shield designs “were derived from astrological observations, either by the naked eye or by use of telescopes obtained from traders” (Taylor 76). This is a clear reference to the cosmological levels and worldview of the Plains Natives. Colors would have specific connotations. The Crow for example used green for earth and red for the sky (Taylor 76). Animal hide, feathers, and other things were fastened to shields and provided the bearers with the abilities of those animals (Mails 494). For example, in a Crow shield (figure 1) made by the warrior called Eelapuash, squirrel skins would make the bearer quick, a weasel skin would make him watchful, and eagle feathers denoted power (Hoxie 79). At other times members of specific societies within a tribe carried shields bearing a common design (Mails 492). Usually the shield would also be used to display *coup*, or the number of enemies confronted in battle (Hoxie 75). These commonalities and motifs link the imagery to a common tradition. Thus the shield designs had to fit within a predetermined cultural form, even though today the individual maintains the status as being the artist.

Shields not only served as the protector for the individual bearer, but could also have a wider use within military campaigns. Some accounts cite specific shields that could tell a war party the outcome of battles or raids, thus serving as a prophet (Mails 491). Specifically, Comanche shields would sometimes contain directional lines to act as a spiritual compass on cloudy days (Mails 492). Although most shields were buried with their owners (Mails 504), some were passed down through generations (Hoxie 75). The act of burying the shield with the owner speaks of the personal connection seen between the warrior and his war bundle, while the act of handing down powerful shields exemplifies the consideration of the benefits to the tribal community that such an act would provide.

The anthropologist Ruth Benedict states that “the vision complex [...] formalized into definite tribal patterns as to context and means of inducement, is enormously the largest and most basic concept of Indian Religion” (Hämäläinen 115). Since the war shield was so influenced by religion, the vision quest can then be seen as the largest and most basic concept of its creation. Although true, regarding the vision quest as the only factor for inspiration and thus creation, would lead to the belief that the Plains shields represent a solely individual experience. While the collective worldview was depicted in the common motifs and symbols, the inclusion of other members of the tribe for the actual construction of the shield also proves the entire societies influence on the individual’s artwork.



Eelapuash, *Crow Shield*, c. mid to late 1800's (figure 1)

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