

WC 8308024  
Blackfoot Shield

A circular and concave buffalo rawhide shield, 19", 50 cm. in diameter, with a short fringed hide carrying strap attached in back; the front covered with two buckskin covers, each held in place by means of a drawstring along their border, which is pulled across the edge of the shield.

Painted on the yellow background of one of these covers is a large spread-winged bird of prey, below eleven white discs in a black arch. Attached along the upper edge of this cover are short hide strips wrapped in yellow-dyed sinew, presumably once holding a fringe of feathers.

The other cover is painted black within a yellow and red border. From this border four snakeheads extend crosswise into the black central part. Short strings are attached at each of the snakeheads (suggesting their tongues) as well as at the black center.

This shield was acquired from a Blackfoot chief by a Captain Thomas A. Clairborne of the U.S. Mounted Rifles, while on his war to or from Oregon in circa 1846. Clairborne gave the shield to Adolphus Heiman of Nashville, Tenn., who presented it to the Tennessee Historical Society in 1857. At that time, Heiman wrote that the shield itself was made of buffalo hide "hard enough to turn a bullet", and that it came with three different covers made of buckskin, "Two of which are decorated with paintings, feathers, etc." According to Heiman, in the dream-origin of this shield the Indian saw "holes in the ground, with snakes in them, of a curious bird, and of a storm, all of which is painted on the shield". This letter from Heiman was published in a Boston periodical, the "Historical Magazine", Vol. 1, 1857. In 1974 only two covers remained with the shield, which was put up for auction at Sotheby's, New York, October 23, 1982, as lot 153. In the auction catalogue, Dr. John C. Ewers suggested that the lost third cover was decorated with a picture of the storm mentioned in the dream origin. However, in his 1857 letter He-man stated that only two of the three covers were decorated. During its many years in museum storage the undecorated third cover may have become separated, not being recognized for what it was.

The actual shield was made of a fresh hide from the "hump" of a buffalo bull, and shrunk to almost half its original size over a pit filled with red hot stones. Spread over a small heap of earth, the skin was weighted down and dried, so as to give the shield its dish shape. When going into action, the warrior uncovered the shield and buckled it from concave to convex, in order to cause missiles to glance off.

The Plains Indian shield was carried on the warrior's back by a sling about his neck. During action this sling allowed the shield to be swung instantly forward over the left arm. This fairly long sling is missing on this shield; the short strap at the back served as a handgrip.

The documentation of this shield indicates that already in the 1840s it was known that Plains Indian shields and their decoration had their origin in visionary dreams. Due to this very personal source of inspiration the Plains Indian war shield was one of the most individual expressions of regional art, and it was the warrior's most treasured possession.

Symbolic decorations were most often attached and/or painted on a shield cover, requiring another plain cover as a protection when the shield was not in use. In this case, the complexity of the visionary origin may have led to the creation of two decorated covers. Multiple painted covers are extremely rare, and restricted to the oldest surviving shields.

The large bird undoubtedly represents the mythical thunderbird, as indicated by the blue part of its body, its claws and the yellow background. The dark arch filled with white discs – here representing the starry night sky – is a detail noticed on several other old Blackfoot shields (Wissler, 1912, fig.16; Donnelly, 1967; 113; Harper, 1971, fig. 91). The stars pictured in the night sky may refer to the old belief that the spirits of fallen warriors became stars. Originally this powerful picture was hidden behind a fringe of feathers, attached along the upper edge of this cover. Most frequently eagle feathers were used for this purpose.

In contrast to this reference to a major sky power, the other cover relates to his enemies in the dualistic cosmology of the Blackfeet. Reptiles, inhabiting the Underworld, at night emerging from the earth and raising their heads in defiance of their enemy. The storm referred to in the recorded fragments of the dream was traditionally caused by hostile encounters of these two antagonistic powers. If pictured, it is the dark central part of this cover.

Revealed in visionary dreams, shields were essentially a war medicine, each with their own instructions concerning its ritual handling, face paint, magic song, and taboos to be respected by its owner. To the Indian, much of the shield's protective value originated from this religious aspect.

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#### References:

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