

Olto Man's Coat, ca. 1890

As part of the upheaval caused by relocation to reservations, usually as far away from their sacred places as feasible, a number of religious movements were begun just before and during the reservation period. What many of these movements had in common was a belief that adherence to the specific rituals prescribed by the movement would result in the return to traditional ways of life and the disappearance of domineering white influence. The movement initiated by William Faw Faw is unique in that, while he opposed the individual reassignment of tribal lands imposed by the federal government in 1887, and encouraged his followers to return to Native traditions, he did not preach that adherence to his religious system would lead to a return of pre-contact life.

William Faw Faw (Waw-no-she) was a member of the Otoe-Missouria tribe. He began his movement in the late 1800s upon recovery from an illness in which he experienced a vision of two young men who told him he would get well and gave him a spiritual message. As the young men spoke to Faw Faw a cedar tree grew beside them and singing birds flew about. He initiated his new religious practices with a ceremony based on his vision that included the planting of cedar trees, tobacco offerings, gift exchanges, presents for the poor, and specific combinations of design elements on clothing. His movement was believed to have been influenced by the Drum Religion (also Dream Dance) introduced to the Otoe by the Potawatomi. Exact details on his religious movement are hard to locate but it would seem to have lasted from about 1891 to 1895. The short duration of Faw Faw's movement makes this coat all the more unusual.

All of the designs on the coat connect to Faw Faw's vision as visible affirmation of the religion he established. The cedar trees on the front of the coat are a direct reference to his vision and the ceremony he established. On the back of the coat, two birds spread their tails in imitation of flight. Filling what would have otherwise been a vacant space are four feathers. While feathers were not specifically associated with the ceremony, Faw Faw did instruct his followers to wear the beaded coats with eagle feathers. The design around the cuffs seems to resemble a row of trees growing in a valley, another allusion to the cedar tree that was a core symbol in his religion's ceremony. As part of this ceremony two women on horseback accompanied the man who was selected to bring back a cedar tree that was central to the ceremony. This is referenced by the figures of women and horses at the hem of the coat. While the meaning of the stars is unclear, with no direct relationship to Faw Faw's religious movement, stars were an important element in the traditional religion of the Otoe-Missouria. Overall, the placement of the motifs reflects a desire for symmetry and balance that is a hallmark of American Indian art.

The beadwork is done in the spot-stitch technique with the use of abstracted forms, both typical of Otoe-Missouria beadwork at the time. The outlining of forms with white beads was also characteristic of Otoe-Missouria style along with the use of a dark background that functioned as negative space, providing a canvas against which the colors of the beads were the focus of interest.

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