

Fully Beaded Valise With Pictographic Designs by Nellie Two Bear Gates

Lakota/Yanktonai

Circa 1907

Collection: Warnock

Item Number: WC9206020

Category: Bag - Beaded Valise

Region: Plains

Tribe: Sioux - Northern Teton

Period: 1900-1925 - ca. 1907

Materials: Multi-colored glass seed beads; commercially tanned leather traveling case; brass and iron fittings.

Description: Traveling case is fully bead decorated with pictographic designs. On one side an equestrian warrior wearing a trailer bonnet and holding a rifle faces another mounted warrior who is holding a tomahawk. The words Nellie Gates 54 yrs. to J. A. Archambault 1907 appear in beadwork. Two mounted warriors holding crooked lances appear on opposite side.

Dimensions: Length 18 inches

Provenance:

Made by Nellie Gates, Standing Rock Sioux

Given to J. A. Archambault in 1907 as a wedding present

Descended to Pat Archambault (grandson of Nellie Gates), Oregon

Epic Fine Arts Co./Masco Corp.

Exhibitions:

Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, 1937 -1939

Splendid Heritage, Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian, Santa Fe, May 27, 1995 - September 27, 1995

Eiteljorg Museum, Indianapolis, October 23, 1998 - October 3, 1999

References:

Lessard, F. Dennis, Pictographic Art in Beadwork from the Cheyenne River Sioux, Volume 16, Number 1, Winter 1990, *American Indian Art Magazine*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Winter 1990), Fig. 11

Important American Indian Art, Sotheby's Auction Catalogue Sale 6297, June 12, 1992 (New York: Sotheby's, 1992), Lot 147

Penny, David W., *Native American Art Masterpieces* (Detroit: Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, 1996), 46-47

Berlo, Janet C and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 31, Fig 20

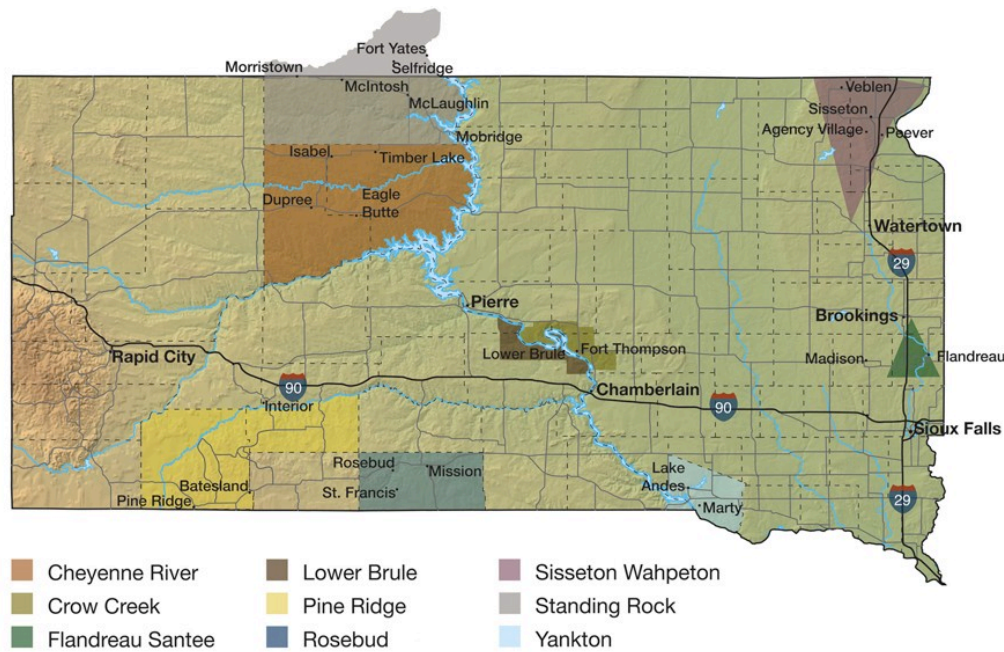
Prior to the reservation period of the late-19th century and for some time extending into that transformative era culturally mandated boundaries existed among Plains Indians which delineated the use of representational and geometric forms of artistic expression. These boundaries remained fairly well fixed along the same lines that existed in the days of the pre-reservation buffalo culture. Basically, the use of these two forms — representational and geometric — was largely gender based.

As a rule, women painted, quilled, and beaded geometric designs onto such objects as parfleches, clothing, and pipe bags. The realm of representational forms, such as the drawings of combat deeds painted on buffalo robes, tipis, and paper pages obtained from whites through trade or capture fell into the purview of men.

There were, to be sure, exceptions to this general rule. For example, men painted geometric designs on the surfaces and buckskin covers of their buffalo hide war shields. In addition, women occasionally quilled and beaded pictographic imagery onto some of the objects they made, such as pouches, although it seems likely that prior to the reservation era these images followed patterns that may initially have been sketched on the surface by men.

On the northern Great Plains round the end of the 19th century a few Lakota (Teton Sioux) women began creating extensively beaded pictographic images on a diverse array of

surfaces. Those surfaces included many previously non-traditional items such as vests, gauntlets, and the object examined here, a valise. Although reflections of this practice are seen in the work of a few anonymous women among the Lakota tribes¹ the best documented examples of them as representatives of an oeuvre of work come from two or more women living on Standing Rock Reservation and possibly Cheyenne River Reservation as well.



Map showing location of Indian tribes in South Dakota and southern North Dakota. Standing Rock Reservation is the area outlined at the top of the map west of the Missouri River, including the communities of McLaughlin and Mobridge. Cheyenne River Reservation is immediately south of Standing Rock and includes the community of Eagle Butte.

Source: South Dakota Department of Tribal Relations

Back in 1990 and 1991 F. Dennis Lessard, in a pair of articles published in *American Indian Art Magazine*, made a stab at pinning down the point of origin for these works, using, as one example, the beaded valise discussed here.²

Lessard initially believed that while all seven Lakota tribes “produced beaded pictographic scenes, mostly horses and riders or standing figures” during the late-1800s and early

1900s, the “beadwork technique is different and the overall effect is quite different from the Cheyenne River style,” the name he applied to the works he reviewed.³

At that point, Lessard was convinced this valise and the other pieces he highlighted exemplified a rare style of beadwork he saw as “a unique expression of Miniconjou art from the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation.”⁴ Upon reflection, however, Lessard set this characterization aside and—apparently based to a significant degree on the photograph below of Joe Claymore and his wife Edith of Standing Rock Reservation, an image evidently taken around 1900 — averred that he believed this work should be described as the “Edith Claymore style.”⁵



Joe Claymore (Clement) and his wife Edith show in a photograph taken by Frank Fiske, probably around 1900. Bags arranged in a pyramid separate the couple. The one shown at the lower left of this arrangement displays an eagle, flags, stars, and a cameo commemorating Admiral George Dewey's accomplishments in the Spanish-American War of 1898, thus establishing a date before which the photograph could not have been taken.

Source: State Historical Society of North Dakota

Lessard made it clear he worked on the assumption that Edith Claymore, the woman in the photograph, “was the creator of all of the items we see in the photograph,” although he was also aware that this assumption “could be wrong.”⁶

Insofar as I am aware Lessard never revisited this topic in print, which is unfortunate because evidence not available to him at the time he wrote about the subject has since become available. This evidence in no way negates his accomplishment in pulling together information or the enthusiasm he displayed in attempting to present as full a picture as possible. Evidence not available to him, however, indicates at least two of the eleven beaded tipi bags, pipe bags, and valises he relied on when laying out his case, all of them objects he evidently believed to be the product of Edith Claymore’s labors, were in fact made by someone else: Nellie Two Bear Gates.



Nellie Two Bear Gates, photographed by Frank Fiske in the early 1900s, around the time she made the valise discussed here.

Source: State Historical Society of North Dakota

Nellie Gates was born in 1854.⁷ She was the daughter of the Yanktonai chieftain Two Bear (*Mato Nunpa*), or Two Bears, and his fourth wife Honkakagewin. Two Bear was the headman of the village Brigadier General Alfred Sully destroyed at the Battle of Whitestone Hill in 1863 when fighting precipitated by the Great Sioux Uprising in Minnesota spilled over into what is now southeastern North Dakota. He later signed the Treaty of Fort Laramie of 1868 and eventually settled on Standing Rock Reservation.



The Yanktonai headman Two Bear, father of Nellie Two Bear Cates, photographed around 1870, possibly at Fort Buford by Stanley Morrow.

Source: National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution

Nellie, whose Sioux name was Gathering of Clouds Woman (*Mahpiya Bogawin*), apparently attended a Catholic boarding school in St. Louis for several years before returning home to Standing Rock. Two Bears died sometime between 1878 and 1879; it was evidently around that time Nellie married Frank Gates, a member of the Blackfeet Sioux tribe⁸ who worked at various capacities around Fort Yates and was invited by the government's agent to

serve as one of his companion-guides on the tribes' last big buffalo hunt in the summer of 1882.⁹



Frank Gates, husband of Nellie Gates, photographed in the early 1900s by Frank B. Fiske seated beside one of his wife's creations.

Source: State Historical Society of North Dakota

Joseph Archambault, for whom Nellie Gates covered the valise in beadwork, was born around 1872. His wife Mary, the daughter of Frank and Nellie Gates, was born in 1884.¹⁰



Mary and Joe Archambault in the early 1900s. Nellie Gates created the beaded valise discussed here as a wedding gift for her son-in-law Joe.

Source: State Historical Society of North Dakota

The beadwork with which Nellie Gates decorated this valise for Joe Archambault features a pair of mounted Lakota warriors on either side, one pair displayed on a surface with written information worked into the beadwork and the other on a plain white surface.



Nellie Gates, photographed in the early 1900s by Frank Fiske beside a valise/suitcase displaying some of her signature pictographic beadwork.

Source: State Historical Society of North Dakota

The first pair, one wearing a spectacular war bonnet with a long feather trail, appears to the left atop a blue (black) horse. The other warrior has a single eagle feather in his scalp lock and rides a buckskin horse. The message displayed with them mentions Archambalut, the date 1907, Nellie Gates and her age at the time she executed this creation. The other side of the valise

depicts two warriors wearing war bonnets, each carrying the curved staff signifying a prominent role in one of the Lakotas' warrior societies; the man on the left sits astride a blue (black) horse, while the one on the right is positioned atop a reddish mount.

The appearance of this valise is consistent with the few other works known to have been created by Nellie Gates, which are notable for the tightness of applied beadwork, vibrancy of color, and exquisite detail shown in forming imaginative compositions. Nellie Gates was, truly, a master not only at beading but in realizing the products of her vibrant imagination.

Ron McCoy, Ph.D.

¹ The Lakota tribes are the Oglala, Brule (*Sicanju*), Hunkpapa, Sans Arc (*Itazipco*), Miniconjou, Two Kettles (*Oohenunpa*), and Blackfoot (*Sihasapa*) (not to be confused with the Blackfeet of Montana).

² Dennis Lessard, "Pictographic Art in Beadwork from the Cheyenne River Sioux," *American Indian Art Magazine*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Winter 1980), 54-63, and "Pictographic Sioux beadwork, A Re-Examination," *American Indian Art Magazine*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Autumn 1991), 70-74. Two photographs of the valise discussed here appeared in the first of these articles, Fig. 11.

³ Lessard, "Pictographic Art," 63.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Lessard, "Pictographic Sioux," 74.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ For biographical information in Nellie Two Bears Gates and her family see "Topic: Finding Record of Great Grandfather John LaMonte," Feb. 12, 2010, Oyate Research Center, <http://oyate1.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=myrelatives&action=display&thread=2178&page=2>, accessed May 15, 2011; "Topic: Two Bears," July 29, 2009-Nov. 13, 2009,

<http://amertribes.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=yanktonais&action=display&thread=345>, accessed May 13, 2011; Curt Eriksmoen, "Josephine Gates Kelly Fought for the Rights of Her People," *The Bismarck Tribune*, March 28, 2010, http://www.bismarcktribune.com/news/columnists/article_83bd0522-3a09-11df-86d9-001cc4c03286.html, accessed May 22, 2011; Susan Power, "Writing to Bridge the Mixed-Blood Divide: An American Indian Perspective," Feb. 10, 2009, Embassy of the United States, Brussels, Belgium, <http://www.uspolicy.be/headline/writing-bridge-mixed-blood-divide>, accessed May 22, 2011.

⁸ Frank Gates's tribal membership is given in "Message from the President of the United States, Transmitting Reports Relative to the Proposed Division of the Great Sioux Reservation, and Recommending Certain Legislation," *Senate Executive Document No. 51, 51st Congress, 1st Session* (Washington, D.C., 1890), 305, http://books.google.com/books?id=BU9HAQAIAAJ&pg=RA1-PA305&lpg=RA1-PA305&dq=%22frank+gates%22+%22standing+rock%22&source=bl&ots=SPeN8ga1Fv&sig=Lm8Cc9mKavZTNLw9YW03xBJJj6c&hl=en&ei=otXfTeqEBsra0QHd7bmyCg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=5&ved=0CDgQ6AEwBA#v=onepage&q=%22frank%20gates%22%20%22standing%20rock%22&f=false, accessed May 17, 2011. His name as Blood Red is in Powers, http://www.ndhumanities.org/secthought_thinkindian.pdf

⁹ James McLaughlin, *My Friend the Indian* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1910), 115.

¹⁰ Information accessed at FamilySearcy.org May 26, 2011.