

WC 9708006

Sioux Moccasins, c. 1880-1910.

A pair of moccasins of common Central Plains type, late 19th century. Made of native-tanned cowhide, sinew sewn; decorated with dyed porcupine quills on the instep, bordered along the sole with two lanes of seed beads in lazy-stitch technique.

Acquired by Milford Chandler among the Teton Sioux, Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, South Dakota, in circa 1920.

The interesting component of these moccasins is their decoration. It is a convincing illustration of native statements that designs decorating moccasins are intended to be viewed from the wearer's angle of view. According to craft workers of the Central and Northern Plains, and of the Great Lakes region, this "self-directed" feature applies also to abstract designs. This custom contrasts with Euro-American decoration, which is primarily one to please the onlooker. This difference relates to the fact that many of the designs painted or embroidered on Indian garments are not mere "decorations".

As explained by elderly native people, these moccasin "decorations" relate to the owner's dreams or mystic experiences. The symbolic designs served as an effective device during meditations on these experiences, in which spirits had conveyed blessings and spiritual powers.

Native creation myths mention that, unlike the animals, man was a latecomer without inherent spiritual power. He depended on blessings transferred to him in dreams by animal spirits. We are told that, in the past, "the people survived by the power of their dreams". Through dreams or visions the people hoped to be adopted by guardian spirits. In contrast to Christian guardian angels, the blessing with a guardian spirit was not taken for granted.

The sacred nature of the buffalo and bear symbols on these moccasins is emphasized by their execution in traditional quillwork; beadwork had become more fashionable by the end of the 19th century. The reference to more than one animal spirit is most unusual; bear claws or buffalo heads were often pictured on Central Plains moccasins, but this is the only example known to this author of the two symbols combined. Explanation of such "self-directed" art would expose one's personal religious life, and was seldom volunteered.

Drs. T.J. Brassler
Peterborough, Ontario
May 2006

Literature:

Brasser, T.J., North American Indian Art for TM. In “The Religious Character of Native American Humanities”. Department of Humanities and Religious Studies. Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, 1977.

Brasser T.J., By the Power of Their Dreams. In “The Spirit Sings, Artistic Traditions of Canada’s First Peoples”. Glenbow Museum, Calgary, 1987.