

Shirt, ca. 1870

Lakota (Sioux)

Plains region

Antelope hide, porcupine quills, pony beads, trade cloth (restored), human and horsehair fringe (restored), sinew thread

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0064

The many locks of hair and unusual ornamented panels suggest that this shirt belonged to a Wakikonza or shirt wearer, a member of the male council that, with a head chief, governed and protected each Lakota band. The locks of hair are respectful donations from family or community members that reflect the owner's civic obligations. Even after Plains intertribal warfare ceased, such honorary shirts were made for use at tribal social and political events, and identified the wearer as a man of importance.

Shirt, ca. 1870

Siksika or Nakoda (Blackfoot or Assiniboine)

Plains region

Buffalo hide, glass and gourd beads, porcupine quills, rabbit fur, tin cones, rope

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0065

The *minipoka* (favored children) of wealthy parents received finely decorated clothing, along with toys, play tipis, and ponies—all of which proclaimed their parents' affection and prestige.

Girl's Dress, ca. 1895

Lakota (Sioux)

Plains region

Buckskin, glass beads, tin cones

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0065

Prior to the reservation period, only the yoke of a dress typically was decorated. Fully beaded dresses may be defiant assertions of Native identity—a response to the extreme pressure to assimilate to white society. The yoke's central U-shape symbolizes a turtle (referring to women's regenerative power); the blue ground stands for water; the yellow bands are shoreline; and the sacred Morning Star shines from the dark-blue fields of the flags. A belt once covered the waist and helped support the skirt's weight.

Dresses created for young girls demonstrated a family's love . . . [and] impressed upon children the importance of artistic expression.

—Colleen Cutschall, Oglala Lakota (Sioux), 2006

Dress, ca. 1850

Nimi'ipuu (Nez Perce)

Plateau region

Deer hide, sinew thread, pony beads, dentalium shells, pigment

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0096

The woman who wore this handsome dress cinched its waist with a belt, from which hung small bags containing useful tools. These garments were called “deer-tail dresses” because of the tail-like detail just below the neck.

Saddle, ca. 1890 – 1910

Lakota (Sioux)

Plains region

Commercial saddle, hide, glass beads, tin cones, horsehair, cloth

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0338

Joyce Growing Thunder Fogarty (b. 1950)

Medicine Bag, 1988

Nakoda/ Lakota (Assiniboine/Sioux)

Plains region

Commercially tanned leather, Native tanned leather, otter hide, rawhide, woolen cloth, cotton, ermine skins, glass beads, brass, ribbon.

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0081a-b

This grandly conceived collar-and-bag was judged Best of Show at the Santa Fe Indian Market in 1988, the year it was made. Hung around a horse's neck, it offers spiritual protection. The beaded bag can be detached and used as a woman's dance accessory. The artist intends each of her works to honor those family members and friends who taught her the art of beading.

Horse Mask, ca. 1875 – 1900

Nimi'ipuu (Nez Perce) or Cayuse

Plateau region

Trade cloth, blue cloth, cotton lining and thread, glass beads, brass buttons, horsehair,
mirror, red-shafted flicker feathers, silk ribbons, hide, ermine

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0097

This mask's zigzag eyes and the light reflecting from its mirrors symbolize lightning. The power of the Thunderbird protected the horse and its rider. On the Plains and perhaps also the Plateau, where this object was made, horses wore masks and other elaborate regalia during prewar processions. After warfare ended in the 1880s, the animals wore masks for celebrations and parades.

Feather Bonnet, ca. 1890

Tsistsistas (Cheyenne)

Plains region

Eagle feathers and fluff, horsehair, felt, glass beads, bunting

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0059

Mounted warriors earned the right to wear feather bonnets with cascading trailers.

Tsistsistas (Cheyenne) men believed the eagle's protective power kept them safe during battle. The trailer's stars signify war power, and also may refer to the U.S. flag, another power symbol. This object, in particular, remains stubbornly attached to the popular stereotype of the Native American.

Blanket, ca. 1890

Wah-Zha-Zhe (Osage)

Plains region

Wool, silk ribbon, beads, thread

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0809

Wah-Zha-Zhe women draped robes like this one around their shoulders so the mosaic ribbon work fell in a brightly colored cascade over their arms. The hands may symbolize family relations, spiritual powers, or friendship. Often known today as friendship blankets, the robes remain treasured emblems of identity. The maker created the design with reverse appliqué, cutting ribbon into shapes, which she sewed then to a contrasting background of ribbon.

Hair Drop (Ornament), ca. 1900

Lakota (Sioux)

Plains region

Porcupine quills, buckskin, brass and glass beads, tin cones, feathers, horsehair

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0067

Gun Case, ca. 1870 – 75

Apsaalooka (Crow)

Plains region

Buckskin, glass beads, trade cloth

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0705

Club, ca. 1840 – 50

Oto

Missouri River region

Wood, pigment, brass tacks

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0800

Traditional weapons used in hand-to-hand combat, war clubs sometimes carry the images of guardian spirits—here, perhaps an otter just above the striking ball. This creature may also refer to the long-tailed Underwater Panther, guardian of the underworld.

Shield, ca. 1860

Apsaalooka (Crow)

Plains region

Buffalo rawhide, antelope skin, trade cloth, eagle and hawk feathers, porcupine quills

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0048

The shield was one of the Plains warrior's most valued possessions. In battle, its thick, tough hide repelled arrows and clubs, while the spiritually charged design of its cover—an image inspired by a dream or vision—kept the owner from harm. On this shield, a green rainbow curves over a white animal that presumably is a mountain lion, a magnificent hunter.

Cradle, ca.1880 – 1900

Gaigwu (Kiowa)

Plains region

Hide, glass beads, wood, German silver tacks, woolen and cotton cloth

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0077

Across North America, infants and toddlers spent much of their young lives in cradles, which offered a safe, snug means of transport on their mother's back or by horse. Among the Gaigwu (Kiowa), skilled bead workers lovingly made cradles, sometimes on commission, for infants who were special in some way. Such cradleboards were cherished family objects, passed from one generation to the next.

My own experience with having babies in a cradle is that they are all-around handy. The baby is always part of the family, not tucked away in a crib or nursery. . . . There is no getting up in the wee hours. My babies slept all night.

—Weckeah (Loping Along Searching), Comanche, 1990s

Knife and Sheath, ca. 1830

Anishinaabe (Red River Ojibwe)

Plains region

Knife: steel, African buffalo horn, brass and bone fittings; sheath: buckskin, porcupine
quills

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0088a-b

Octopus Bag, ca. 1840

Red River Métis

Plains region

Caribou skin, silk thread and cloth, cotton cloth, glass beads, woolen yarns

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0092

Men traditionally used such bags—popularly known as “octopus bags” after their eight long tabs—to carry fire-making flints and steel. Fire bags continue to be used today as part of the dress for dances, powwows, and other special occasions. The delicate floral embroidery is typical of Métis work of the period.

Parfleche (Storage Bag), 1840 – 50

Kutenai

Plateau region

Rawhide, hide, pigments

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0095

Parfleches—leather cases made of rawhide and containing everything from food to sacred medicine—were ubiquitous among western Native Americans. Women painted geometric and abstract designs on these objects, which were made in all shapes and sizes—rectangles, round tubes, and as here, smaller fringed cases. Heavily fringed parfleches were prominently displayed as part of equestrian finery at parades and powwows among the Plains and Plateau people. The term *parfleche*, came from the French of early fur traders; these distinctive envelopes were made of rawhide, which also was used in shields that deflected (*par*) arrows (*flèche*).

Tipi Bag, ca. 1900

Lakota (Sioux)

Plains region

Hide, glass beads, tin cones, horsehair, dye

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0360

Early-19th-century traders dubbed soft storage containers *possible bags*, but *tipi bag* is more accurate because they were kept in traditional conical tents. When moving camp, the bags were hung on the side of a saddle, where their decorations could be seen and admired.

Buffalo Robe, ca. 1820 – 40

Inunaina (Arapaho)

Plains region

Buffalo hide, paint

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0393

The so-called box-and-border design that graces this woman's robe resists straightforward interpretation. It may refer to concepts concerning the life-giving aspects of the universe. Or perhaps it is an abstract representation of a buffalo. Yellow paint probably once covered the field of the robe. The wearer draped the garment lengthwise around her shoulders, with the skin's head to the left.

Black Hawk (1832?- 1889?)

Drawing Book, 1880 – 81

Lakota (Sans Arc Sioux)

Plains region

Paper, ink, and pencil

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0614

Black Hawk's extraordinary drawing book contains scenes of hunting and dancing, natural images, and numerous depictions of warfare and ceremony. During the winter of 1880 – 81, William Caton, a trader at the Cheyenne River Agency in Dakota Territory, offered Black Hawk a credit of fifty cents for each drawing he made. Eventually, the artist's work was bound into this book.

Plains men painted their autobiographies on animal hides, transferring their efforts to European media during the latter half of the 1800s. After Plains people were confined to reservations, men also began to draw other scenes from traditional life, as if to preserve their memories of an existence that was rapidly changing.