

## Winter Count: 2006-03-17

Lakota

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### Questions:

What you are looking at is called Winter Count. A Winter Count is like a calendar or history book that records events by pictures, with one picture for each year. The Lakota call them *waniyetu wowapi*. Waniyetu is the word for year, which is measured from first snowfall to first snowfall. It is often translated as "a winter." *Wowapi* means anything that is marked on a flat surface and can be read or counted, such as a book, a letter, or a drawing. **Take a moment to look at this object. Start from the upper left corner and follow in the clock-wise direction. Describe what you see.** (Discuss some of the details they see)

This winter count, created by the Lakota, records historical events from 1798-1904, giving us a 106-year history of the community. Each image on a winter count represents the most memorable (not necessarily the most important) event that happened one specific winter in this particular village. **Select an image or two and speculate on what was or were the most memorable and widely known events within the community in those years?**

**What animal (s) or plants do you see most prominently represented here?**

(Horses were first brought to North America by the Spanish in the fifteenth century. By the eighteenth century, horses played a significant role in the Lakota way of life. With horses, the Lakota were more efficient hunters—able to quickly travel across a larger expanse of land in search of buffalo and to transport surplus meat and hides for trade. Sometimes bands came into conflict with neighboring tribes. These conflicts were often recorded in winter counts, with certain icons used to denote a specific group. These icons often mirrored a physical trait unique to that group. Horses also allowed for a greater interaction between the Lakota and the Euro-American traders, who were often distinguished in the counts by a broad brimmed hat.)

**If you were going to record your past two years with an object for each, what would you choose? What means would you have used to record them?**

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### Key points:

- Historically, Plains Indian tribes preserved the passage of time through oral history, recalling important events to mark the year and passing those stories down through the generations. This winter count, a pictographic calendar created by the Lakota that records these stories from 1798-1904, offers a 106-year glimpse of their history. Each image on a winter count represents an important event that happened one specific winter. They were originally drawn on hide, and the images were transferred to muslin cloth when the hide became too worn. The Institute's winter count is painted on muslin, and the sequence of events starts in the upper left hand corner and moves in a

clockwise direction. Most Lakota winter counts start with an image of a calumet decorated with feathers that symbolizes a ceremony that blesses the elderly, expectant mothers and children. Winter counts preserve important aspects of Plains Indian history through the eyes of the people who were there.

- The Count Keeper: Each Lakota band, or *tiyospaye*, had a designated winter count keeper who served as the community historian. The keeper was responsible for recounting the band's history at various events throughout the year and for adding a new image to the winter count each year. Before recording the past year on the count, the keeper consulted with a council of elders to choose an appropriate event by which to remember the year. Traditionally only men served as winter count keepers, and the role often was passed down from one family member to another. In the 20th century some counts were passed on to women. Winter counts were copied over many times as they wore out or required more space, or when a new keeper took over. While many counts clearly originated from a common source, recopying led to differences as well. A keeper might have chosen to record a different event, a different aspect of the same event, or might have made a mistake.
  - How the events were chosen: The event chosen was not considered the most important event of the past year, but only the most memorable. For instance, sacred ceremonies that occurred regularly were not often chosen because the event was not unique to a particular year. The keeper was also responsible for retelling the *tiyospaye's* history at various times throughout the year. During ceremonies or other social gatherings, he would bring out the count and use it as a visual reference to name the years. In this way, the members of the band knew their history and could use particular years to index events in their own lives, such as the year of someone's birth. It was important that the keeper, in consultation with the band's elders, chose events that were easily remembered by his entire band.
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- Evolution: As some Lakota people learned to write their own language in the 19th century, a few keepers began to add written words to the pictures, and eventually pictorial art declined as a form of record keeping when literacy became widespread among the Lakota, although many people today see other types of recording -- making marks through written words, art, video, and even online exhibits -- as a modern continuation of the winter count tradition.
  - Outside influence: The earliest winter counts were painted on hides—buffalo hide, deer skin. These records were transferred to muslin and paper once those materials became available. When an outside market developed for winter counts Lakota people again painted copies of their counts on hides to satisfy the expectations of the curio trade.
  - Over 170 Lakota winter counts are known, but many of them are exact replicas of each other. Many others are closely related versions representing the same tradition; they cover similar spans of time and share common event references. Lone Dog, The Flame, The Swan, Long Soldier and the Major Bush winter counts were all collected from *tiyospayes* of northern Lakotas who lived close to each other and interacted on a regular

basis. American Horse, Battiste Good, Cloud Shield, No Ears and Rosebud are all from the southern Lakota bands.

- Geography: The Great Plains encompasses an area of over two million square kilometers (approx. 772,204 square miles) between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains. This vast expanse of rolling grassland lies largely west of 96 degrees west longitude and between 32 and 52 degrees north latitude. Extending north from the Rio Grande, the Great Plains region stretches 2,300 km (1,429 mi) to the Saskatchewan River in southern Canada.

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### Readings on Winter Counts

Burke, Christina E. (2000) "Collecting Lakota Histories: Winter Count Pictographs and Texts in the National Anthropological Archives" in *American Indian Art* 26 (1), 82-89, 102-103.

DeMallie, R. and D. Parks (2001). "Teton," *Handbook of the North American Indians: Plains. Vol. 13: Pt 2.794-820*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books. Academic overview of the Lakota tribes.

DeMallie, R. and D. Parks (2001). "Tribal Traditions and Records," *Handbook of the North American Indians: Plains. Vo. 13: Pt 2.1062-1073*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books. Scholarly overview of the winter count traditions of the Plains Indians.

Sources used in the preparation:

"Lakota Winter Counts." National Anthropological Archives. Smithsonian Institution. Washington, D. C. [http://wintercounts.si.edu/html\\_version/pdfs/lakotaTG\\_full.pdf](http://wintercounts.si.edu/html_version/pdfs/lakotaTG_full.pdf)

Winter Count." Artsconnected.org. <http://www.artsconnected.org/resource/52118/1/winter-count>