

Dixon Palmer (Tsain-sah-hay)

Gaigwa (Kiowa), born 1920

Little Bluff Tipi, 1992

Canvas, paint

Minneapolis Institute of Arts

Displayed with permission of the artist

Little Bluff (Tohausen) is revered as the most famous of the Gaigwa (Kiowa) chiefs. A distinguished warrior and diplomat, he served as head chief of his people for thirty-three years, before his death in 1866.

The design for this battle tipi was given to Little Bluff by Sleeping Bear, a Cheyenne leader, as a gift to mark peace negotiations between the two tribes in 1840. It was passed through the family for many generations and the tipi was recreated several times. The original tipi was made of the tanned hides of fourteen buffalos, supported by twenty-two wood poles. Little Bluff was said to re-assemble this famous lodge each year after the summer hunt. The last version was made for the family's use between 1916 and 1918.

The tipi is divided into two sections, one with stripes and the other with representational images. The yellow stripes appeared on the original tipi and may refer to battle honors. The alternating stripes are black—the traditional color of victory for Plains tribes—added by Little Bluff to honor his fifteen successful war expeditions. The series of twelve tomahawks hung with eagle feathers and the eight lances decorated with red cloth and eagle feathers represent coups made by respected Gaigwa warriors. The upper portion of the north side of the tipi cover was reserved for the image of a war

event in which the Gaigwa were surrounded by their enemies but still managed to escape. This scene, which was changed each time the tipi was remade, always consisted of a single warrior encircled by the enemy. The large battle scenes were also modified with each renewal, to signify important achievements in the continuing military history of the tribe. Tipis painted with battle scenes were also used by the Lakota and other Plains tribes.

At age twelve, Dixon Palmer became involved in traditional dancing and costume making. He painted his first tipi in 1955, and made his first copy of the Little Bluff tipi in 1973 for an exhibition. A version of this famous tipi, painted by Palmer and his brother George in 1974, is used by a contemporary Gaigwa veterans group known as the Black Leggings Society (*ton-kon-gah*). The north side contains battle pictures that illustrate the war records of men who fought in World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, using modern equipment such as tanks. It is a powerful reminder that the military society continues to play a vital role in the life of the Plains warrior.

["Art of the Native Americans: The Thaw Collection"](#) is on view in the Target Gallery October 24, 2010–January 9, 2011