
Title of Object

Cradle Board Cover

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: unknown

Culture: Dakhóta

Date of Object: c. 1880

Country: United States

Accession Number: 2003.162.2

File Created: 1/15/2017

Material/Medium: Hide, quills, beads, ribbon, sequins, cloth

Author of File: Lucy Hicks

Department: Art of the Americas

Reviewer of File: Kara ZumBahlen

Last Updated/Reviewed: 8/8/2017

Tour Topics

Motherhood, Family, Native American, American, animals/birds, dress, relationships, quillwork, child, children, gender roles, women, life cycle, celebration, nature/flowers, daily life, symbolism

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

Take a moment to look at this cover. What intrigues you? What colors do you see? What animals or insects do you see?

(Discuss quillwork) Why do you think the artist put so much time into decorating this cover?

How do we decorate baby clothes and blankets today? What is similar? What is different?

Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

Cradleboards are a type of protective baby carrier, historically used by the indigenous peoples of North and Central America. They enabled a mother to carry her child on her back, strap it to the side of a

horse, or lean it against a tree or building when busy. The stiff wooden baseboard protected the baby's spine in its first few months of life, whilst the hood provided shade from the sun or shelter from wind and rain. Many elders believed cradleboards 'socialized' infants when worn because it brought the child to the eye level of the adults. (Pitt Rivers Museum)

[Cradleboards] often feature naturalistic designs or cultural motifs, rendered in beadwork or paint, and might be decorated with shells, quills, ribbons, coins or beads. Some have dangling items, designed either to amuse the baby or to act as protection against diseases like smallpox. Most were collected in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when the cultural traditions of many of these groups were under threat. Fortunately however, some of these traditions survive and cradleboards and baby-carriers are still used by some indigenous peoples today. (Pitt Rivers Museum).

This cradle board cover dates to the 1880s, and shows motifs of dragonflies, butterflies, elk, buffalo, and flowers. These motifs are designed with dyed porcupine quills, embroidered on the hide. These emblems are symbolic, and are important to the Dakhóta people. The buffalo or American bison was integral to the survival of the peoples of the Great Plains. From beard to the tail, American Indian nations used every part of the bison. Because the bison provided many gifts—from tipis and clothing made from hides to soap from fat and tools made from bones—they were honored as relatives and paid tribute to through songs, dance and prayers. In addition to the use of their physical body, American Indians modeled social behavior from observing bison, such as how to live in a healthy and productive manner. Some of the important lessons were breastfeeding offspring, valuing both young and old, being physically active, respecting both the female and the male, healthy eating and using resources wisely. (American Bison, Smithsonian)

Quillwork, or the use of dyed, flattened porcupine quills as a means of decoration, is unique to the indigenous people of North America. The porcupine's habitat ranges from Maine to Alaska, and quillwork decoration emerged in most places porcupine quills could be found. Dyed with aniline dyes or in "teas" made of natural materials, the quills are softened in the mouth and then wrapped around thread or sinew stitched to tanned leather. Designs can be simple or complex, and there are many ways of wrapping and plaiting the quills to achieve different patterns. Examples of quillworking have been found that are at least 400 years old, and quillworking toolkits dating to the 6th century CE. (Wyoming State Museum)

Sometimes the quills are taken from a blanket thrown over a living porcupine, sometimes the porcupine is skinned and the quills are plucked from the hide. Some modern quillworkers use quills from roadkill. Next, the quills are sorted by size and dyed. Before synthetic dyes were available in the 1850's, quills were dyed with natural pigments. Blue could be made from earth pigments, purple from chokecherry, yellow from bark and red from marsh bedstraw. Aniline dyes (originating in Europe) made creating bright colors faster and easier. Quillwork is usually done by women, who begin to learn the skill around age 10. (Wyoming State Museum)

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

"Cradleboards" are the most commonly recognized type of Native American baby carrier, and as the term implies, include a wooden component that was most frequently a flat backboard. Cradle making was often reserved for the most accomplished artisans, and cradleboards were some of the most costly items to produce, usually given as gifts. In fact, few children had a cradle created for them. If a family

didn't have their own, one was often borrowed from friends or distant relatives until the child outgrew it. Families who were gifted with a cradle continued to use it for generations....

...On cradleboards, children first were often swaddled in cloth, laid on a cushion of soft plant material, and then bound securely to the board. This binding often prevented the movement of arms and legs, which imitated the feeling of being held. Children spent the majority of their first two years of life in a cradleboard, only removed for short periods of time. Cradleboards served the roles of both bed and carrier. With the child safely secured, mothers and family members were free to complete daily chores, either with the cradle strapped to their backs, or leaning upright against a stable object. This allowed the child to socialize with the group, and be easily accessible, should he/she need feeding or changing....

...While all cradleboards had the singular purpose of securely carrying a child, some cradleboards were viewed as symbols of kinship and Native identity, and have often been considered by others as works of art. Cradles held both symbolic and practical purposes, so great care was taken in their creation; some took months to complete. (American Indian Cradles and Cradleboards, Milwaukee Public Museum) This may explain why the cradle board cover we are looking at here is in such wonderful condition.

The cradleboard also has beadwork decoration. The designs created in paint, quills, and Native beads carried over into beadwork made after European contact. The Dakota began to use hand-blown beads, then standardized "pony" beads, and finally smaller, factory-made "seed" beads. (Seed beads are the type of bead on the cover.) They turned to seed beads in particular to experiment with new techniques while maintaining and reproducing older styles. (Evolution of Dakota Beadwork, MNopedia)

Beadwork and quillwork were the traditional domain of Native women. By the early nineteenth century, Dakota women were exchanging food, skins, and pelts with Euro-American traders in return for goods like cloth, silk ribbons, and glass beads. By the 1830s, Dakota women had access to commercial glass beads in a variety of colors, sizes, and shapes. The new material posed new challenges, like using glass to mimic the subtle color gradations of dyed quills and beading the yoke of a dress without making it too heavy for its wearer. Over time, glass beads replaced both quills and handmade beads on Dakota objects because of their variety, convenience, and availability. (Evolution of Dakota Beadwork, MNopedia)

Among various Plains tribes, quillwork was the province of quillwork guilds. If a woman wanted to learn the skill, she made an offering to a member of the guild. If her offering was accepted, she would be taught the art and allowed to work as an apprentice. Besides being instructional, the guilds were also religious in nature. To become a member of a quillwork guild was to assume a station of respect and power. (Women's Arts, NMAI)

"Dakota people are divided up into seven bands or council fires. All are related, share customs and practices, and are easily understood among each other. The far western bands use the L-dialect, Lakota, and are located primarily west of Minnesota. The D-dialect, Dakota, are considered the eastern bands, whose homelands are in Minnesota. They are sometimes called the Santee, from Isanti Mde or Knife Lake, southeast of Lake Mille Lacs. They make up the Sisitonwan (Dwellers of the Fish Ground), Wahpetunwan (Dwellers Among the Leaves), Wahpekute (Shooters Among the Leaves), and the Bdewakantonwan (Dwellers of the Spirit Lake). The band names are significant because they originally defined the location of each village or camp. For example, the village of the Bdewakantonwan at one time was located near Lake Mille Lacs. (Dakota, MNopedia)

Many Dakota and Lakota people have oral traditions which explain how quilling was brought to them by Double Woman (or Double Face Woman). Historic quillwork from the plains, much like painting and beadwork, is often characterized by geometric patterns. Concentric circles and rosettes, as well as other geometric shapes, were commonly found on panels adorning men's shirts. Through working with knowledgeable practitioners and relatives (and sometimes by studying museum collections), today quillwork artists are revitalizing the practice; it is again becoming a vibrant and living art form. (Quillwork, MNHS)

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

Cradle covers were usually made by the relatives of the child, and given to the mother to use when the baby arrives. Cradles play an important function because it nestles the child, and the cradle can be worn on the mother's back, or put on the side of a horse. Highly decorated ones are especially prized because it is symbolic of the pride and love of the child, and illustrates the skill of the artists.

This porcupine quilled cradle cover is an excellent example of Dakota work. It features elaborate floral designs and animals. Elk, buffalo, dragonflies, and butterflies can be found. The artist who created this masterpiece had an exceptional command of quillworking, illustrated by the graceful portrayal of the birds.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Artsmia.org: Label

Lakota Cradleboard, Pitt Rivers Museum: <http://oxuni.museum/it/prm/top-objects/cradleboard>

Evolution of Dakota Beadwork, MNopedia, Minnesota Historical Society:
<http://www.mnopedia.org/evolution-dakota-beadwork>

The Land, Water, and Language of the Dakota, Minnesota's First People, MNopedia, Minnesota Historical Society: <http://www.mnopedia.org/land-water-and-language-dakota-minnesota-s-first-people>

Quillwork in the collections of Minnesota Historical Society:
<http://discussions.mnhs.org/collections/tag/quillwork/>

Women's Arts, Smithsonian, National Museum of the American Indian:
<http://nmai.si.edu/static/exhibitions/horsenation/arts.html>

Quillwork, Wyoming State Museum:
<https://wyomuseum.culturalspot.org/exhibit/quillwork/rgIjSKJkqYIKQ>

American Indian Cradles and Cradleboards, Milwaukee Public Museum:
<https://www.mpm.edu/research-collections/anthropology/online-collections-research/american-indian-cradles-and>

American Bison, Smithsonian, National Zoo (includes a great interactive photo, clicking on each part of the buffalo to see the uses of that part): <http://americanbison.si.edu/american-bison-and-american-indian-nations/>