

Cheyenne Cradle, ca. 1880

Traditionally, the most important society among Cheyenne women was devoted to the ceremonial decoration of objects made of animal hides with porcupine quills. With very ancient antecedents, the society's complex rituals ensured that only women who had mastered the requisite procedures were allowed to create objects made of hide, guaranteeing that hide objects were properly processed and decorated. The society "had strict rules in their design and they kept secret the meaning and arrangement of the colors, as well as the relation of the designs to each other. The designs were always symbolic and talismanic, representing concrete organic objects, whereas the colors were more emblematic of the abstract in creatures, e.g., white for active life; very light blue for quietness, peace, serenity (from the cloudless sky); green for growing life; red for warmth, food, blood, home; amber yellow for ripeness, perfection, beauty (from the sunsets); black for cessation of enmity or hostilities (symbolized a lack of heat). The meaning of the colors ramifies as they are combined, or, according as they are lighter or darker" (Grinnell 1923, 168-169). While designs were symbolic and esoteric, they represented concrete organic objects. For example, the cross-like symbol on the boards of this cradle has been variedly identified as the morning star and crossroads, depending on the tribal affiliation. In contrast, the colors were more emblematic of the abstract in creatures and creation itself.

With the transition from quillwork to beadwork, this adherence to the old designs was followed, but there was more experimentation since the traditions of the Cheyenne women's societies fell somewhat into abeyance.

This Cheyenne cradle is a wonderful example of how color and placement of design motifs can completely change the appearance of an object. The diamond lozenges, also seen in the Kiowa cradle, are elongated toward a horizontal axis, and the basic lozenge shape running down the center is embellished with rectangles, with additional shapes emerging from the top and bottom. In the Kiowa cradle, the uniform values of the colors imparts a uniformity in which background and motifs form a seamless whole. In contrast, the motifs in the Cheyenne cradle seem to float on the white background.

Although the different motifs have been given names, this does not tell us the symbolic meaning of the designs. The juxtaposition of motifs held a personal significance for its creator, and that information is now lost to us. However, if we consult the analysis done by George Bird Grinnell (Grinnell 1923, 168-169), we can see that the symbolic values he assigned to the colors are consistent with the cradle's purpose. The colors of the cradle can be viewed as a message for an active life (white), for warmth and food (red), for perfection and beauty (yellow), for growing life (green), and for peace and serenity (blue). While this is only an extrapolation, the meanings assigned to the colors seem appropriate desires for new life.

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Reference Grinnell 1923