

WC 8308029

Eastern Sioux Sheath and Knife

A knife case made of dark brown dyed buckskin, sinew-sewn, and decorated with porcupine quillwork; edged with white seed beads. Holding a steel knife, stamped "P.C.J. & Co. Cast Steel", on a plain wooden handle.

The mark stamped on the knife blade is that of Pierre Choteau Jr. and Company, active in the fur trade from 1838 until the 1860s (Batkin, 1995: 68). This type of knife was popular in Dakota Territory in the 1850s, but the case may well be a decade older.

The shape of this case is intended for a double-edged dagger. Knives with one cutting edge were carried in a case conforming to the knife's shape; curved on one side, straight on the other side. Such knife cases were usually carried on the belt.

A decorated knife case such as pictured here was worn on the chest by the means of a neck string attached to the extensions at the top of the case. It was a prestigious badge of office, restricted for use by chiefs in the western Great Lakes region. This is particularly well documented for the Eastern Sioux and Menomini (Carver, 1956; 296). The Eastern Sioux origin of this case is indicated by the wide cuff with its images of deer in quillwork. Such deer were frequently pictured on quillworked covers of Eastern Sioux baby cradles in the early decades of the 19th century. Most probably they symbolized fertility. The asymmetric composition of vertical designs on the lower part of the knife case is unusual in Sioux art, but similar asymmetric designs were frequently used on knife sheaths of the neighboring Menomini Indians (Feest & Kasprzycki, 2001).

The wearing of chest knives was given up by the Eastern Sioux in the 1850s; this example dates back to circa 1840.

Drs T.J. Brassler
Peterborough, Ontario
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References:

Batkin, J., ed., *Splendid Heritage*; Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian, Santa Fe, 1995.

Carver, J., *Travels Through the Interior Parts of North America*, London 1778; Minneapolis, 1956.

Feest, Chr. F. & S.S. Kasprzycki, *Comparative Evidence, Critical Reasoning, and the Identification of Styles*. In Feest, Chr. F., edit., *Studies in American Indian Art; A Memorial Tribute to Norman Feder*; Univ. of Washington Press, 2001.