

WC8308060
Sioux Pipe Bag

A bag made of red wool trade cloth, length 22.5 inches, 57 cm.; width 5.25 inches, 13.5 cm. Seams run from top to bottom along both sides of the bag. The open top is curved, creating two pointed extensions on both front and back, reinforced with yellowish cotton binding. The lower part of the bag, about one-tenth of its total length, is decorated with a panel of pony beads in a loose lazy stitch technique. This beadwork panel is near identical on both sides of the bag; two blue deer images on one side, two black deer on the other side, both on a white background. A lane of pony beads also covered the two side seams. Attached to the bottom of the bag is a panel of rawhide slats, wrapped with greenish-blue and red bird quills. Metal cones form a fringe along the lower edge of this panel.

The pipe was acquired from a Sioux chief, when he visited Fort Dodge, Iowa, in 1851, according to the documentation written on the cotton edging.

Pipe bags were carried at formal social functions by certain members of the Sioux elite called Wakincusas, or "Pipe Bearers", holding their pipes and tobacco. Due to this prestigious function, Plains Indian pipe bags were invariably made of native-tanned buckskin. Practically the only exception were the Yankton and Yanktonai Sioux, who made (many of) their pipe bags of either red or dark blue trade cloth. The fashion appears to have started in the 1830s, and continued into the 1870s.

Other distinctive features of their early pipe bags are the use of bird-quill wrappings in this greenish-blue and dull red colors, and the fringe of tin cones instead of the usual long fringes. The rather narrow beadwork panel of pony beads, and the identical decoration on both sides, is typical for regional pipe bags made before the 1850s, i.e. before the introduction of seed beads stimulated the creation of more complex designs in larger panels of beadwork.

The frequent intermarriage of Eastern Sioux neighbors among the Yankton and Yanktonai may explain the deer images in the beadwork, and also the pointed ears at the top suggest Eastern Sioux influence. This beautiful pipe bag may date back to the 1840s.

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Literature:

Feder, N., Bird Quillwork; American Indian Art Magazine, Vol. 12-3, Summer 1987.