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Lakota Sioux Saddle Blanket, ca. 1850

As Native people of the Plains acquired horses during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they quickly integrated them into nearly every aspect of their economic, social, and ceremonial lives. For Native groups already living on the Plains, horses allowed the bands to move more frequently and efficiently to hunt, trade, or wage war and to carry greater food supplies, larger buffalo hide tipis, more buffalo robes, and other belongings. Hunters on horseback could pursue buffalo much faster and over greater distances than on foot, and kill buffalo more efficiently. For Lakota, Cheyenne, Arapaho, and other people with homelands outside of the Plains, horses radically transformed their cultures as they moved into the region and adopted buffalo-hunting as way of life (Holder 1970, 90–107). As horses became crucial to Plains life, they became important sources of wealth and prestige, and men with the ability to capture horses from other tribes were greatly admired.

Plains Indians developed specialized equipment for riding and handling horses. Although men often rode bareback, women made pad saddles of tanned buffalo, deer, or elk hide for their male relatives. They also made saddle blankets of tanned hide, some of which were undecorated with the hair remaining, while others were embellished in porcupine quillwork and beadwork. Saddles made of elk antler or wood covered in rawhide had high pommels and cantles and stirrups made of bent wood covered in rawhide. Other specialized horse gear included decorated head ornaments and masks, bridles and headstalls, martingales, cruppers, and saddlebags.

This saddle blanket is decorated with costly pony beads, demonstrating the prestige associated with horse ownership. These early glass trade beads are larger than the later seed beads and came in a limited range of colors which included black, white, and blue as seen on this blanket. The early beaded designs on leggings, men's shirts, moccasins, women's dresses, pipe bags, and saddle blankets such as this one tended to be relatively simple, consisting primarily of broad bands and blocks of single colors and basic squares, triangles, and rectangles. Additional circular beadwork, tin cones, and fringe complete the overall design of the saddle blanket.

In pre-reservation days, Lakota men demonstrated their respect for their best horses—those used in battle and pursuing buffalo—by adorning them with feathers, paint, masks that were painted or covered in porcupine quillwork, beaded bridles, and other equipment, and parading them before leaving for battle or as celebrations of successful warfare. A beautifully made saddle blanket such as this one could have been made for a giveaway on such an occasion. This parade tradition continued on reservations into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries during celebrations commemorating holidays such as the Fourth of July or the Battle of the Little Bighorn on 25 July. Such celebrations included feasts and giveaways during which leaders dressed themselves and their horses in finely made clothing and horse equipment (Amiotte 2008, 250–251). Other parades featuring horses with such decorated equipment took place at reservation rodeos and powwows (Baillargeon and Tepper 1998, 130). Reminiscent of earlier times when bands traveled seasonally to hunt and trade, celebrations and displays of tribal arts reinforced tribal cultural traditions and history during the difficult reservation period.

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References Amiotte 2008, Baillargeon and Tepper 1998, Holder 1970