

WC 8401020
Eastern Sioux Courting Fan

A flat board of white pine wood, shaped like a hand mirror, long 16.5 inches, 42 cm.; wide 11 inches, 28 cm. Along of the rim of the disc a piece has broken off (can easily be restored).

Both sides of the disc are decorated with engraved designs. One side shows a circle of 35 human figures (including 31 women), surrounding a rosette that is reminiscent of the sun design painted on Plains Indian robes. On the other side the figures of one bull elk followed by 23 does surround a geometric pattern, in which thunderbirds are pictured in the four corners. The figures are painted red, blue, green and black.

This object was acquired by Lester Strawn (1855-1949), a former Attorney General of Illinois, who lived in Ottawa, Illinois. There is no more information on its origin. Alexander Gallery, New York, acquired this object at auction in November 1983.

The Minnesota Sioux origin of this style of wood engraving is evident from a fairly large number of war clubs, boxes, mirror-boards and a cradleboard, all decorated with identical and similar carvings, the majority documented as Eastern Sioux of the period 1820-1850 (none of those assumed to be Chippewa origin are documented as such).

The images carved on this object suggest a connection to the Elk Dreamers, a Sioux cult association. Membership was open to young men who had dreamed of the bull elk, whereby they shared in the bull elk's seductive powers over women. The images on one side of this object show the bull elk followed by his large harem. They are pictured around a design that is most probably a cosmogram, a symbolic picture of the universe. The thunderbirds residing at the four corners represent the lords of the Four Winds. They surround a four-pointed design that represents the spider web. In Sioux mythology the spider and its web are intimately associated with both Thunder and the mythical elk (Wissler, 1908, p. 48; compare spider web design on p. 52).

In their annual dance performances the Elk Dreamers carried mirrors, the flashing of which was supposed to send beams of hypnotic power to the female audience. This seems to be pictured on the other side of this object, where beams extend from the central circle toward the female spectators. In addition to the circle of women, the engraving shows a group of five headless individuals. They represent berdaches, i.e. men who behave and dress like women (though not necessarily homosexual). This note came recently from some Sioux people who saw pictures of this object, and confirmed my interpretation.

However, this is not a glass mirror, even though it has the shape of one. Thus it may be that this is a fan carried by the owner at festive occasions, proudly proclaiming thereby his membership of the Elk Dreamers Society. Several early photographs show Eastern Sioux holding circular fans (Albers, 2001, p. 771).

The evidence presented here supports the identification of this wonderful and rare object as a ceremonial fan of Eastern Sioux origin, presumably dating back to circa 1840.

In the late 19th century the use of “magic” mirrors was adopted in the popular Grass dance of the Plains Indians. In this context belongs a similar wooden fan that came on the market in 1991 (illustrated in *American Indian Art Magazine*, Autumn 1991, p. 111).

Other examples of Eastern Sioux engraving

box lid, U.S. National Museum, Cat. 17535, pre-1875, no provenance.
box lid, Historisch Museum, Berne, Cat. Po.74.410.50, Ft. Snelling, Minn., 1833.
box lid, Christie’s Auction, NYC, 17 May 2000, Lot 158, North Dakota, 1874.
box lid, Naprstkovo Museum, Prague, n.n., Eastern Sioux, 1856.
box lid, Detroit Institute of the Arts, Cat. DIA 81.447, Eastern Sioux, pre-1863
cradleboard, Smithsonian, Cat. 73.311, Eastern Sioux, 1830s.
mirror board, American Museum of Natural History, NYC, Cat. 50.2/6304, Sioux
mirror board, Brooklyn Museum, Cat. 50.67.96, Eastern Sioux, 1830s.
mirror board, Historisch Museum, Berne, Cat. Po.74.410.28, Eastern Sioux, 1833.
war club, Sotheby’s, October 22-24, 1983, Lot 211, 1820s
war club, Wellington Collection, no provenance

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References:

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Brassler, T.J., *By the Power of their Dreams*. In: *The Spirit Sings, Artistic Traditions of Canada’s First People*, Glenbow Museum, Calgary, 1987.

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Christie’s Auction, NYC, 17 May 2000, Lot 158.

Feder, *Art of the Eastern Plains*. The Brooklyn Museum, 1964, Fig. 16.

Feest, C.F., *Native Arts of North America*. Thames & Hudson, 1992, p. 62.

Powers, W.K., *The Art of Courtship among the Oglala*. *American Indian Art Magazine*, Spring, 1980.

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Wissler, C., The Whirlwind the Elk in the Mythology of the Dakota. Journal of American Folklore, Vol. 18, 1905.

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