

WC 8404003

Southern Arapaho Painted Elk Hide

A native-tanned elk hide, decorated with a painting of the “border & hourglass” type in red and black. According to an old handwritten tag, this robe was acquired from the “the Elk Mountain Ute Indians” in Clinton, Utah.

The painted design is well known from buffalo robes of the Comanche Indians, though examples have been acquired from several other Plains Indian tribes (Ewers, 1939:14). The Comanche tended to execute the painting on a hide that first had been colored monochrome yellow, and in the painting they usually used more colors than on this example. Most unusual, for a Comanche product, is the band of many parallel lines running from the central pattern to the border.

The latter detail is recorded for the Arapaho only. In the 1890s, Kroeber was told by these people that this band of multiple lines represent buffalo trails (Kroeber, 1900; 84-85). Most of the surviving Arapaho buffalo robes are painted with their distinct version of the “border & box” design, but they also used the “border & hourglass” pattern, including their buffalo trails design. An excellent example, dating back to circa 1850, is in the collections of the Museum of Natural History in Dayton, Ohio. The Arapaho name for such a robe is “Comanche painted robe”, indicating their source of inspiration (Ewers, 1939; 15). Presumably, the “border & hourglass” pattern was most popular among the Southern Arapaho, circa 1850-1870.

The central design in this pattern was called hiitani, representing the buffalo as a symbol of abundance (Kroeber, 1900; 84). Together with the buffalo trails the painting expressed the buffalo hunter’s prayer for success.

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References:

- Ewers, J.C., Plains Indian Painting, Stanford University Press, 1939.
- Kroeber, A. L., Symbolism of the Arapaho Indians. American Museum of Natural History, Bulletin 13, New York, 1900.