

WC 8708551
Tipi Model

A miniature tipi cover made of canvas, decorated with horizontal parallel black stripes painted over the southern half; with a large number of black Maltese crosses painted on the northern half; with a column of five pipes painted down the center at the back of the tipi.

Length 74.75 inches, 190 cm.; Height 44.5 inches, 113 cm.

Originally in the General George H. Harries Memorial Collection. Ex-collection Dennis Lessard, who acquired it from a South Dakota antique dealer, without information on its origin.

Museum collections include many tipi models, usually assumed to be children toys or tourist souvenirs. However, miniature versions of traditional tipi paintings used to be kept by native families who owned the rights to such a design. Such models served as a reference in the painting of full-size tipi covers. The painting on this particular model is not a fantasy as used on toys or souvenirs.

Traditionally, tipi covers were painted with either designs originating from visionary dreams, or with the record of the tipi owner's war needs. The latter might be pictographic or abstract. The development of this military heraldry was stimulated by prestige and wealth achieved in warfare. This miniature is an example of this abstract military heraldry.

The earliest surviving record of this tipi painting is pictured on a painted hide, collected among the Sioux in 1843 (Canadian Museum of Civilization, Cat. Nr. V-E-281). In 1850 this design was observed on the tipi of the chief of an Oglala-Teton Sioux band (Bushnell, 1922, pp 67). Thus the traditional use of this design is well documented for these Western Sioux in the 1840-50 period. Similar, but not identical tipi designs have been recorded for the Cheyenne and Kiowa (Ewers, 1978; Fagin, 1988).

The column of five pipes at the tipi's back indicates that the tipi owner has been five times the leader of a war party. The painting of multiple parallel stripes circling around the tipi cover has been recorded for all tipi-using tribes on the Plains. It was a design frequently used by war chiefs, and the black stripes referred to the number of war parties or battles participated in by the tipi owner. Similar stripes were often painted on the costumes of warriors.

In this case, the striped pattern is combined with a pattern of multiple stars to form a so-called "Half" tipi design. The stars may refer to the spirits of fallen warriors, who were believed to change into stars.

By means of this miniature, a Teton Sioux war veteran preserved the memory of his career after his people were forced to settle on a reservation in the late 1870s.

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Peterborough, Ontario
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References:

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Ewers, J.C., Murals In The Round; Painted tipis of the Kiowa and Kiowa-Apache Indians; Smithsonian Press, 1978.

Fagin, N.L., The James Mooney Collection of Cheyenne Tipi Models at the Field Museum of Natural History; Plains Anthropologist, Vol 33, 1988.