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Ghost Dance Dress, Teton Sioux, 1890

A woman's dress cut in traditional Sioux style, made from cotton flour sacking; decorated with typical Ghost Dance paintings of Thunderbird, stars and crescent moon. A white downy feather attached at the back. The text printed at the inside of the dress indicates that the material came from a flour sack sent to the Rosebud Indian Agency in 1889.

Lengthy 44.25 inches; 112.4 cm.

Acquired by F. Dennis Lessard from the Brule-Teton Sioux, Rosebud Indian Reservation, South Dakota, c. 1970.

By the 1880s, the U.S. Army had crushed all resistance of the native population throughout the American West. The buffalo herds were exterminated; the Indians were forced to settle on reservations and live on poor government rations. Poverty, malnutrition and disease demoralized the Indians. Government agents replaced the Indian chiefs and suppressed all native ceremonials.

In the late 1880s, hopeful messages came in visions to Wovoka, a Nevada Paiute Indian. Through divine interference, the White people would disappear, deceased friends and relatives would come back to life, and the old way of life would be restored. According to Wovoka, this development could be accelerated by a peaceful life and the frequent performance of his Ghost Dance.

Visitors came from far and wide to learn the doctrine firsthand from the prophet, and within a few months Native people across the Plains were continuously practicing the new ceremonial. Wovoka's instructions allowed each tribe to adjust the ceremonial to its own traditional practices. It was generally believed that the Whites would be eliminated by supernatural forces, but the Sioux anticipated the involvement of warfare. A Sioux woman had in a vision seen her deceased friends wearing elaborately decorated garments, and she called the women together to make large numbers of such "Ghost shirts" and "Ghost dresses" for the dancers. Kicking Bird, a respected warrior, conceived the idea that these garments would render the Ghost Dancers invulnerable to the soldiers' bullets.

With buckskin no longer around, cotton cloth, muslin and even old flour sacks were used to make garments. Some 20,000 Sioux men, women and children actively participated in the Ghost Dances, many of them wearing these garments. Most of the sacred symbols painted on them came from the old repertoire of stars, moon crescents, birds, and dragonflies, in addition to some new designs seen in individual visions. The dress presented here is representative of this regalia.

The large thunderbird between two stars is a common theme on many of these garments. Unique is the bird's head extending over the top onto the back. Actually, it would be the head of the woman wearing this dress that became the bird's head; i.e. she identified

herself with the thunderbird. Presumably this feature related to her vision, and also the circular design painted on the back may refer to her own dreams; in combination with the crescent moon it may represent the sun. The red painted area on these dresses were said to stand for the sky in the morning.

All over the Plains the large numbers of Indians dancing in a communal frenzy frightened the White population and alarmed the government officials. Among the Sioux Indians the government agent called in the U.S. Army; chief Sitting Bull was killed; an Indian camp was massacred at Wounded Knee. With the failure of the bullet-proof garments, the dream came to a tragic end in 1890.

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Peterborough, Ontario
April 2006

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