

WC 8709017

A buffalo hide, decorated with a complex painted design; length 70 inches; 171.8 cm.
Acquired from Alexander Gallery, New York City.

The painting technique utilized on this hide is well known from other Plains Indian examples. The patterns were first pressed into the surface with a bone or wooden stylus. Parts of the design were then painted. Once the paint was dry, a clear sizing was applied like a varnish, covering the painted and unpainted parts of the design. Over time the unpainted parts stood out white, due to the gradual discoloration or soiling of the surrounding skin.

Although the technique of this painting indicates a Plains Indian origin, a more precise identification is hampered by the near-unique art style on this hide. This situation suggests that this painting is representative of an art style that disappeared long before ethnographic field research salvaged pertinent information.

The painted composition presents through the center a vertical column, consisting of a rectangle and a row of red triangles, both with numerous parallel white line – suggesting a fringe – terminating in double rows of dark-tipped feather designs. Along the left side of this column a number of long triangular patterns spread fan-wise; on the other side is a complex borderline. All these patterns consist of several smaller elements, in which stepped triangles and feathers on long white lines are most conspicuous. Several patterns were filled with cross-hatching.

As a whole the composition is reminiscent of an abstract representation of a buffalo skin, comparable to the central design on Comanche robes. In this case, however, the ‘buffalo skin’ design is that of the whole composition, and it is transversed by the aforementioned column.

Both in its composition as well as in many details, this painting resembles a hide painting formerly in the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, Germany (Cat. Nr. IV-B-12-476), illustrated in Krickeberg, 1954, pl. 8. It was assumed to be of Sioux origin, but there was no documented provenance. Comparable is also a buffalo hide in the Museo de America in Madrid, Spain (Cat. N. 3288), illustrated in Feder, 1877, fig. 13 (the picture is upside down). This example is believed to date back to c. 1780-1803, and it was recorded as from “New Mexico”. In view of the age of this painting the term New Mexico may well refer to a region far greater than the present state of that name. Also in this painting we see a rectangle with a fringe of feathers on white lines.

These three hide paintings are almost certainly examples of the same art tradition, most probably somewhere in the Southern Plains region. There are details reminiscent of Comanche paintings, and there is Pueblo influence represented by the many stepped triangles with short lines extending from the corners. Located between these two groups, and artistically influenced by both, were several Apache tribes. Reliably documented examples of early Apache hide paintings are rare, but a few comparable paintings have

been found. Stepped triangles with short lines extending from the corners decorate a Lipan or Mescalero Parfleche dating back to ca. 1830 (Collection American Museum of Natural History nr. 50.2/4340, illustrated in Torrence, 1994, fig. 51).

Stepped triangles with short lines extending from the corners were painted on a Chiricahua or Mescalero Parfleche (Denver Art Museum, illustrated in Morrow, 1975, pp. 60, 78.)

Stepped triangles and series of long parallel lines are part of the painting on a Mescalero Parfleche of c. 1875 (National Museum of the American Indian nr. 3/5404, illustrated in Torrence, 1994, fig. 57).

Rows of simple monochrome triangles, as on this hide, are frequently used in Apache paintings. For an example, see Torrence, 1994, fig. 58.

None of these details have been noticed in Comanche paintings. In the identification of early artifacts from the Southern Plains we will never have large collections of comparable material; they just do not exist. Based up the existing examples we may add this rare hide painting to the few surviving examples of early Mescalero Apache art, probably dating back to ca. 1830-1850. The complex composition of this painting suggests that its function goes beyond decoration, but the symbolism is unknown.

This painting is that of a woman's robe, but the hide has lost the natural shape of a buffalo hide. Whether this happened before or after the hide was acquired by non-natives is anybody's guess.

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Peterborough, Ontario
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References:

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