

WC 8803015
Cheyenne Rattle

A small rattle, height 7", 17.8 cm. Consisting of a globular rawhide head attached to a straight handle. The head is made of two round pieces of rawhide, sewn together with sinew. An extension from this globe is fitted with a round stick, which is wrapped with leather thongs. Polish and patina indicate extensive use and great age.

With a pointed and probably hot instrument, images have been grooved into the rawhide globe, presumably while it was still green and soft. Sand rammed down into the globe caused the sides to bulge out. Hot sand may have been used to dry this globe. After the globe had its desired shape, the sand was removed and replaced with some gravel before the handle was attached.

Two small buckskin bags are tied onto the handle. The decoration with seed beads suggests a younger age than the rattle itself.

The object was acquired from Alexander Gallery, New York, without information on its origin.

Though rattles of this general type are fairly common in Plains Indian collections, those with incised decorations are rare. The incised images, the small size of the rattle, and its evident frequent use strongly suggest that this was the rattle of a native doctor ("medicine man"). The associated pouches probably contain face paint pigment and/or herbs, both used in the treatment of patients. The younger age of these pouches suggest that the rattle was inherited (by ritual transfer) by the old doctor's apprentice and successor.

The incised images on side A show a crescent, crosswise surrounded by four buffalo hoofs. The symbolism of this design most probably refers to the Moon, its role as Mother Earth, her life-giving powers emphasized by the buffalo as her associates at the four sacred directions. The dark color and crescentic horns of the buffalo were interpreted as symbolic references to the night and the moon. On side B a human figure holds a ceremonial pipe in one hand, and a lance in the other. Above the person's head is a circle, most probably referring to the person's identity. Such "name glyphs" above the head of a human figure are well known in Plains Indian Art.

Symbolic art on the opposite sides of such objects frequently refer to the opposites in a dualistic worldview, of the Upper World (Sky, Sun, Day, Male) versus the Lower World (Earth, Night, Female) and their many associates. In this case, the man with the circle above his head may represent the Sun as a major deity of the Upper World. He is pictured here with the attributes of a leader of warriors. Remarkable for his long shirt, such as were worn in pre-horse times. Presumably the artist wished to indicate the ancient origin of this religious image.

By means of these symbolic references to the major sources of spiritual powers this rattle was imbued with these powers. The depicted symbols, their inter-related composition,

and the style of these pictures are in accordance with sacred art expressions of the Cheyenne Indians. It has been suggested that the artist belonged to the Suhtaiio subdivision of the Cheyenne tribe. All the known examples of such incised rawhide rattles are ancient, and also the condition on this rattle suggests great age, probably dating back to circa 1800.

Drs. T.J. Brassler
Peterborough, Ontario
March 2006