

WC 8808036

A bag made of native-tanned deerskin, length 27 inches/68 cm., width 5.25 inches/13.5 cm. The shape of this bag identifies it as a container for pipe and tobacco, carried by Plains Indian men at formal social functions.

Extending from the open top are four long tabs, with remnants of blue and white edge-beading, and tin cones attached at the ends. These cones hold the remnants of horsehair tassels. The lower part of the bag, less than one-sixth of its total length, is decorated with blue and white pony beads in a loose lane stitch technique, creating a pattern of three white crosses connected by their horizontal bar. Both sides of the bag are identical in their decoration. A lane of blue and white pony beads runs along both edges from top to bottom, covering the sinew-sewn seam along one of these edges. This beadwork is in poor shape. The long fringes at the bottom have the upper parts quillwrapped, the lower parts twisted. Barely visible in the remnants of the quillwork is a red and white pattern. A line of pony beads runs between the two parts and keeps the fringes separated.

This bag was acquired by Alexander Gallery, NYC, from a private museum in Switzerland. Presumably this was the private museum in Sankt Gallen, that closed down in c.1958-'60. Fixed to the bag is a small sticker with the number 80, which may relate to the catalog system in the aforementioned museum.

There exists about ten very similar pipe bags, all of them attributed a Cheyenne origin, though only one of them is reliably documented (Kostelnik, 1989, p.5). Several other pipe bags decorated with similar beadwork, but without the tabs at the top, have been assumed to be of Blackfoot origin. The problem is that all of these bags were made before c. 1845, when the regional beadwork was still in its experimental phase.

Restricted by the large size of the pony beads the designs were very simple and similar throughout the northern and central Plains. Tabs around the open top of pipe bags were probably common, as suggested by their later survival on the northern Plains, the Eastern Sioux, Cheyenne and Arapaho. After c. 1845, the adoption of smaller seed beads stimulated the emergence of distinct tribal art styles.

The pre-1840 origin of this bag is indicated by the use of pony beads in a loose lane stitching, and the identical decoration on both sides of the bag. The crossed bar design in the beadwork may be a proto-type of the more complex design of alternating bars in different colors, broken by vertical lines, which became a hallmark of Cheyenne art after c.1850. A Cheyenne origin is supported by the twisting of the bottom fringes. This bag cries out for a restoration to its former beauty.

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Peterborough, Ontario
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Literature:

Conn, R., Cheyenne Style Beadwork American Indian Hobbyist, Vol. 7-2, 1961.

Kostelnik, M., Cheyenne Ladies Leggings. Whispering Wind, Vol. 22-6, 1989.