

WC8808037

A bow, made of elk antler, backed with a layer of sinew, and wrapped with sinew at both ends and at the center; the bowstring of twisted sinew. Halfway up both limbs are wrappings of red trade cloth wrapped with porcupine quillwork. Fixed to the bow is a small blue sticker, partially torn, with the numbers "...3".

Length 26.25 inches; 66.5 cm.

Acquired by Alexander (Acevedo) Gallery, New York, from a private museum in Switzerland. Most probably this was the private museum in Sankt Gallen, closed down in c.1958-'60.

Among the upper Missouri tribes bows made of elk antler and mountain sheep horn were considered more for ceremonial than practical use, but among the Plateau tribes, the Shoshoni and their Comanche relatives such bows were reported popular in hunting large game. Whether all these tribes made these bows themselves is not positively documented; bows made of antler and horn were highly prized in the intertribal trade. The difficult and time-consuming process of their manufacture is described in greatest detail for the Hidatsa, who were located at the hub of the trade network. In 1912 they still remembered that they used to make many elk antlerbows in the past. Apparently this was before c.1850, when the artist Rudolph F. Kurz found that such bows had become very rare. The few antler bows surviving in museums all date back to the early years of the 19th century.

Well known is the excellent picture of an elk antler bow in Karl Bodmer's portrait of the Hidatsa chief Two Ravens in 1834. The decoration of his bow was similar to that on this bow in the Warnock Collection. Due to the wrapping of the central part it has not been ascertained whether this bow is made in one piece, or of the two limbs spliced together. Most antler bows were of the compound type, though occasionally small bows were made in a single piece. Antler bows were usually about three feet long, and the much shorter length of this bow suggest that it is indeed made of one antler.

Before the coming of the horse the native people used long bows; shorter bows were adopted by the equestrian hunters. The making of bows from antler and horn required the use of steel knives and hatchets. This implies that few, if any, short antler bows were produced before c.1770. This particular example was most probably made among one of the upper Missouri River tribes in c.1830-'40.

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July 2005

Literature:

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