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Ceremonial Pipe, probably Iowa, c. 1800-1830.

A pipe stem made of ashwood, fitting into a red stone pipe bowl, total length 47.75 inches; 121.2 cm. The stem is of the flat type, though slightly convex in cross section, and slightly tapering toward the mouthpiece. From near the mouthpiece down about half of the stem length is wrapped with one quill-plaited bands of porcupine quills. A bundle of horsehair is tied with sinew at the center of the underside, and horsehair also covered the mouthpiece before much of that hair wore off.

The pipe bowl is of the elbow type, made of a siliceous argillite called catlinite. The bowl flares up to a banded rim around the slightly rounded top, with a narrow smoke hole. A small ornamental crest rises from the shank.

This ceremonial pipe once was in the collection of Andre Nasser; its earlier history is unknown.

The formal features of this pipe bowl and its stem indicate their origin from the region between the western Great Lakes and the Missouri River, presumably in the period of c. 1800-1830. An even earlier date might be argued in view of some very similar pipes collected before 1789, now in the Musee de l'Homme, Paris. However, most of the other examples were collected in the early decades of the 19th century.

The deep red color and its fairly easy carving made catlinite the favorite pipestone. Contrary to a popular idea, catlinite does not harden on exposure to air. Most of the material was quarried at a well-known site now preserved as Pipestone National Monument, near Pipestone, Minn. Until c. 1700, this quarry was exploited primarily by the local Iowa and Oto Indians, though tradition has it that the quarry was considered sacred and open to all people in need of pipestone. By c. 1700, the Iowa and the Otto were ousted by the Yankton Sioux, who took exclusive control of the quarry. The Sioux used the raw materials, blanks, and finished products as major trade items in the regional trade. Pipe making was a specialized craft of only a few people in each tribe; in the 1840s a well-carved pipe bowl was worth one horse in the regional native trade. The bowl of this particular pipe is similar to many other examples from the aforementioned region and period; it could have been made by any of the regional carvers.

In ancient times, the long pipe stem was split lengthwise, the smoke channel excavated, and the two halves glued together again. Most of the surviving pipe stems were made after the introduction of metal tools by white traders. The smoke channel was made with a red-hot wire, pushed through the pith core of the wood. Ash was the favorite wood due to its straight grain. The slightly convex surface of this pipe stem is characteristic for examples of the early 1800s.

The quillwork pattern on the upper side of the pipe stem is completely different from that on the underside. On the upper side, four sections are divided by five bands with zigzag designs, most probably representing the beaks of woodpeckers (McLaughlin, 2003, 234).

Real woodpecker beaks were attached in similar positions to the stems of more ornate sacred pipes or “calumets”. Generally, they symbolized sunlight and life, though among the Omaha, such bird beaks stood for the seven tribal chiefs.

The decoration on the underside of this pipe stem consists of a long white stripe on a red background, reminiscent of the “path of life” carved on the stems of calumets. There is usually a symbolic relationship between the two differently decorated sides of many Indian art objects, often relating to a dualistic interpretation of Sky and Underworld.

The quillwork designs on this pipe stem are very similar to those on several pipe stems of the closely related Iowa, Oto and Missouri Indians (Skinner, 1926). In contrast to the regional style of the pipe bowl, it is this quillwork that allows us to be more tribally specific. Unfortunately, these three tribes adopted a completely different art style during the 1840s, after which the knowledge of their former art symbolism rapidly faded away.

Pipes were used in the communication with the spirits, the smoke believed to carry man’s prayers upward. Pipes were also used to mediate relationships among people. Indian pipes have popularly been called “peace pipes”, but they were smoked to solemnize and ratify all sorts of agreements. This particular pipe is the type that was carried by a chief at formal occasions as a symbol of his authority. This is pictured in many portraits made by George Catlin in the 1830s, as well as in many early photographs.

In formal meetings with native or white visitors, the pipe was passed around clockwise, and each smoker went through the motions of offering the pipe to the four major directions, to the powers above and the powers below. After smoking together, the visitor usually received the pipe stem, this being the sacred portion of the pipe. The pipe bowl was kept by the host, particularly if decorated with an effigy representing his own guardian spirit. This custom may explain the presence of many pipe stems without pipe bowl in many museum collections.

The symbolism of the pipe bowl as female and the stem as male is a recent innovation propagated by some native people. Of the same origin is the novel idea that pipe stem and bowl should be kept separate in exhibitions, despite the many pictures of Indians holding their pipes with the two parts combined.

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Literature

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