

Lakota Child's Vest

Collection: Warnock

Item Number: WC9211002

Category: Vest - Child's Vest

Region: Plains

Tribe: Sioux - Southern Teton

Period: 1875-1900 - ca. 1885

Materials: Native tanned cowhide; dyed and natural porcupine quills; red, white and blue glass seed beads; sinew sewn.

Description: Boy's vest is elaborately decorated with quillwork. Front depicts two elks in orange and yellow quills. Back of vest has two American flags in red, white and blue quills and the stylized image of two elk heads.

Dimensions: Height 11.25 inches 28.5 cm; Width 11.75 inches 29.8 cm.

Provenance:

Morley Reed Gottshall Collection

Col. George Green Collection

Ramona Morris

Gary Spratt

Paul Gray, Lebanon, Ohio

Epic Fine Arts Co./Masco Corp.

References:

Parke-Bernet Auction Catalogue, Parke-Bernet Galleries, Inc., New York, Sale 3271, Lot 222, November 19, 1971

This superbly conceived and constructed child's vest was made by a woman on one of the Lakiota tribes' reservations in North Dakota or South Dakota about a quarter-century or so after people she knew fought at the Battle of the Little Bighorn, sometime around the end of the 19th century.¹

As an artifact from that culture and that time the vest stands out as a striking manifestation of two competing, inextricably entwined elements characteristic of Lakota life during a difficult transitional period. On one hand, Lakotas found themselves buffeted by sweeping cultural change and the challenges that posed. But that said, they lived in an environment characterized by the powerful, respectful presence of resilient, enduring cultural continuity.

This was made during an era that saw a tipi-dwelling, freely moving, buffalo hunting people struggling to adjust to a more or less sedentary existence under close government supervision. As an artifact of that time the vest serves as an example of two processes that attended the swirling currents of change set into motion over the years by contact between Native Americans, Europeans, and Euroamericans: adoption and adaptation.

Among the elements associated with that cultural contact was rapid, widespread adoption by American Indians of a considerable inventory of formerly alien material culture objects. These ranged from commercially produced needles, thread, and clothing to firearms, cooking utensils, and hoop metal for making arrowheads. Frequently, the Indians who adopted these artifacts lost little time adapted them to the

existing patterns and practices of their own cultural milieus.² As a result, imaginative modifications were made that permitted ease of incorporation into settings not anticipated by the objects' original designers, developers, and disseminators.

These thoughts bring us to this vest. The sleeveless waistcoat is a form of European attire that inevitably accompanied the Spanish, French, and English vanguards of cultural contact into American Indian country at an early date. Lakotas would have initially observed waistcoats in use among the traders with whom they came into contact; later, among the government officials and others from beyond the tribal domain with whom contact dramatically increased during the 19th century. Gifts of non-Indian clothing were obligatory for tribal delegations visiting Washington, D.C., on diplomatic missions from the mid-19th century on.³



Two views of the Oglala Lakota headman Red Cloud wearing a vest. The photograph on the left was taken during the 1870s in Washington,

D.C., when he served as the leader of diplomatic delegations; he is wearing a standard, undecorated Euroamerican waistcoat from the period. The photograph on the right, made about three decades later; shows him wearing a beaded vest.

Towards the end of the 19th century Lakota women began producing fully-beaded vests.⁴ Often associated with the Wild West shows of the period, these featured geometric designs, sometimes mingled with representational pictorial figures.

This particular vest, most likely made for an Oglala Lakota or Brule Lakota child, features a relatively beadwork trim framing rich pictorial imagery created by a woman expert at working with dyed porcupine quills. The use of porcupine quills in Lakota decoration was already in steep decline towards the end of the 19th century, having lost favor as much easier to use beads enjoyed increasing popularity. The tight quillwork displayed here, however, is of the finest quality.

The vest's front features eight pairs of stylized images that to Western eyes likely resemble representations of birds in flight with their wings outstretched. However, the rules of perspective seen in Lakota traditional art from this period do not particularly favor such an interpretation. Although it is not possible to determine with complete certainty what these forms represent — and bearing mind that some motifs, even those with names attached to them, represented nothing more than design⁵ — they are strongly suggestive of variations on the stylized leaf and leaf-and-flower imagery drawn from European and Euroamerican models and incorporated into Native American quillwork.⁶

a pair of five-pointed stars (see the image of Red Cloud wearing a decorated vest on the previous page). Stars represented nothing new in Lakota art, although their more traditional star imagery consisted of a cross-like four-pointed star; each of the two

that appear on the vest is a “white man’s star,” a design Lakotas adopted from the outside culture.

Far more abbreviated stars appear as dots on the two American flags that are paired on the back of the vest. The flag as an artistic motif appears in late-19th century Lakota beadwork and quillwork far more often than might generally be imagined. Why this came to be is not known, and the reasons for the development— factors that have been suggested range from patriotic feeling to appropriation of a novel form to commercialization — remain uncertain.⁷

Across the bottom of the front of the vest two bull elk confront one another. They are depicted bugling, a point deduced from the lines emanating from their mouths — standard Lakota pictographic imagery for connoting the idea of sound.

In fact, elk imagery carries over from the front of the garment to the back where two stylized elk heads are found along the bottom. This motif, well known in Lakota pictorial art, represents the animal by showing the top of its head, ears, and horns.

Lakotas revered elk for a variety of reasons. The male’s canines (of which each animal possesses only two) could be worn as pendants signifying a desire for health and good luck, and numerous women adorned their best dresses with as many of these teeth as possible. The power of the elk was sought in war because even the bulls’ enormous antlers made their way with speed and agility through thickly wooded areas. Finally, the bull elk’s ability to corral a harem of females during the rutting season — when elevated testosterone levels promoted both antler growth and sexual activity

—appealed to Lakota men in search of what might euphemistically be described as love magic.⁸

A Lakota man who dreamed of the Elk — in the sense of an archetypical form of the animal that served as an intermediary and messenger who placed the dreamer in contact with forces the Western world deems “supernatural” — thereafter belonged to a group known as the Elk Dreamers. In their ceremonies Elk Dreamers wore masks, often made from the head of an elk with the horns intact; many also carried a wooden hoop, covered in leaves or fur with a mirror in the middle and held in place with thongs, which represented a snare or trap for women.⁹

Elk Dreamers performed one of their ritualistic dances at Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota, at least as late as 1882 (Fletcher 1884:282; Wissler 1912:87). The date coincides with the beginning of a half-century-long period during which the United States government imposed “civilization regulations” to repress traditional religion, a heading under which the Elk Dreamers fell. (Murphy 2007:37). If not the last, that Elk Dreamer rite may have been among the last such ceremonies conducted by the old-timers, at least publicly. ¹⁰

Still, memories lingered into the reservation era, which is why Two Shields, an Elk Dreamer, could sing one of the society’s songs shortly before World War I, one he declared “had been handed down for many generations.”

Whoever consider themselves beautiful

After seeing me [the elk] has no heart¹¹

Like the pictorial elements illustrative of warriors' activities — the counting of coups and taking of enemy horses, for example — that appear on some children's garments and other beaded and quilled accoutrements from the period, the elk imagery seen on this child's vest probably served a twofold purpose: bringing the blessing of the archetypical Elk to the wearer and proclaiming a revered elder's status as an Elk Dreamer.

Taken as a unified entity, this child's vest represents an intriguing blend of old and new in Lakota life as it was lived in the latter part of the 19th century.

The woman who created it utilized a clothing template from outside the traditional cultural milieu, replaced more traditional stars with a newer form, included the flag of the United States, and resolutely relied on the power of Elk Medicine to protect and promote the life of the child for whom she made this garment. With this coming together of old and new, the already familiar and that with which she was becoming familiar, this anonymous Lakota woman perfectly captured the forces representing both cultural change and cultural continuity among her people.

Ron McCoy, PhD.

¹ My identification of the vest's maker as a woman is based on the well-established Plains Indian traditional division of labor by sex, a pattern of activity within which the manufacture of garments fell to the women. The seven Lakota tribes are the Oglala, Brule (Sicangu), Hunkpapa, Two Kettles (Oohenonpa), Miniconjou, Blackfoot (Sihaspaa), and Sans Arc (Itazipco).

² See Arthur Woodward, *Navajo Silver: A Brief History of Navajo Silversmithing* (Flagstaff, AZ: Northland Press, 1971) for numerous examples of American Indian adoption and adaptation of designs, clothing, and ornamentation of European origin.

³ “The principal delegation gift was clothing. Since government policy was to turn the Indians into white men, it was presumed that making them look like white men was a giant stride in that direction. Thus, almost as soon as the bewildered visitors reached the city, they would be given complete wardrobes. They would be poked and measured by a corps of cobblers and tailors who scurried in and out of their quarters bringing samples of clothing and leather and fitting them with suits and shoes. The Indians would also make the rounds of the assorted mercantile establishments that lined Pennsylvania Avenue.” Herman J. Viola, *Diplomats in Buckskins: A History of Indian Delegations in Washington City* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995):118.

⁴ Ronald P. Koch, *Dress Clothing of the Plains Indians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977): 131.

⁵ For an interesting observation on the meaning, as well as the lack of meaning, to designs in quillwork and beadwork see Carrie A. Lyford, *Quill and Beadwork of the Western Sioux – Indian Handcraft Pamphlets 1* (Lawrence, KS: Haskell Institute, 1940), 75.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 45 pl. 26, 53 pl. 29, 54 pl. 30.

⁷ See Richard H. Pohrt, *The American Indian/The American Flag* (Flint, MI: Flint Institute of Arts, 1975). Also of interest is Toby Herbst and Joel Kopp, *The Flag in American Indian Art* (Cooperstown: New York State Historical Association, 1993). Michael H. Logan and Douglas A. Schmittou, “Inverted Flags in Plains Indian Art: A Hidden Transcript,” *Plains Anthropologist*, Vol. 52, No. 202 (2007): 209-227, offers an interesting take on one form of U.S. flag imagery.

⁸ For an overview of the subject see my “An Elk Am I’: The Elk in Lakota Art and Lore,” *American Indian Art Magazine* (forthcoming). Three of Clark Wissler’s works — “The Whirlwind and the Elk in the Mythology of the Dakota,” *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 18, No. 71: 257-268; “Some Protective Designs of the Dakota,” *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, Vol. 1, Part 2 (1907); and “Societies and Ceremonial Associations of the Oglala Division of the Teton-Dakota,” *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, Vol. 11, Part 1 (1912) — remain superb sources of information on the Lakota-elk relationship. See, also Alice Fletcher, “The Elk Mystery or Festival of the Ogallala Sioux. In *The Sixteenth*

and Seventeenth Annual Reports of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Vol. 3, Nos. 3 and 4 (1884): 276-288.

⁹ Frances Densmore, "Teton Sioux Music," *Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin*, 61 (Washington, D.C.: 1918): 78; Linea Sundstrom, *Storied Stone: Indian Rock Art in the Black Hills Country* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004): 183.

¹⁰ According to Densmore, 293, the last meeting of Elk Dreamers among her Hunkpapa informants at Standing Rock Reservation also took place in the 1880s, at the time the government cracked down on traditional Lakota religious observances.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 293–294.