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Crow Rawhide Cases, ca. 1850

Women of the Crow and other Plains tribes created a variety of rawhide bags, painted in vibrant geometric designs, to accommodate the shapes and sizes of the objects they held. The parfleche—a large flat envelopeshaped container—was the most common form. Made of durable buffalo rawhide—often in sets of two with matching designs—parfleches filled with food, clothing, and other belongings were hung by hide loops in tipis and transported on horses and dogs when families traveled.

Painted rawhide containers in different forms were made for specialized purposes, such as cylinders that held and protected feather bonnets and ceremonial items and flat cases which stored medicinal herbs, dried plants, and sacred materials. This set, consisting of two fringed cases—a smaller boat-shaped case attached by hide strips directly over a larger square case—would have been used to store such sacred and ceremonial materials. Its distinctive Crow design features complementary painted triangles and diamond forms in red, yellow, blue, and green pigments. According to Lowie, these four colors were the common colors used in Crow rawhide painting (Lowie 1922, 288–289; Lowie 1983, 79). The large square case has long hide fringes and red wool cloth trim on the flap decorated with white and green pony beads and edged with stroud cloth, white beads, and hide fringe. The boat-shaped case has shorter fringes and a red cloth trim along the top edge.

Using reed brushes and porous pieces of buffalo bone, sharpened for drawing fine lines or rounded for applying paint to larger areas, women painted the characteristic geometric designs of such rawhide containers when the hides were staked out to dry and before they were cut into various forms. Traditionally, they produced paints from natural pigments from the minerals and plants of the region, including ochre, hematite for red, charcoal for black, lake algae for green, buffalo gallstones for yellow, and blue clays. Ground into fine powders, the pigments were mixed with water and thin glue made from boiled hide scrapings, which helped the paint to hold its colors. Commercial pigments became available through Euro-American traders during the eighteenth century and after 1890, predominated in the painting of rawhide containers (Torrence 1994, 37).

Although the hides of other animals such as elk or moose could be used in making parfleches and other rawhide containers, buffalo hide—characterized by its toughness and resilience—was the preferred material. In the late nineteenth century, with the decimation of the buffalo herds and settlement of tribes on reservations, women began to make rawhide containers from the hides of domestic cattle, and by 1890 the new material predominated. By this time, manufactured containers were available for daily life, but women continued making rawhide containers for specialized purposes and for ceremonial gift-giving.

The Crow also made similar square and boat-shaped rawhide cases as separate pieces for sacred uses. Such boat-shaped cases are primarily associated with the Crow, although a limited number of similar examples have been collected from the Arapaho, Blackfeet, and Nez Perce (Torrence 1994, 198; Lowie 1922, 288–289). When fastened together, such cases could be suspended from a woman's saddle during travel or hung in tipis. When not in use, owners also hung such bags directly over their beds where they provided spiritual protection for themselves and their families.

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References Lowie 1922, Lowie 1983, Torrence 1994