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TIMOTHY SMITH / HD5599

Beyond Bridle Fashion?

Blood Indian accessory may have charmed spirits

AN OBJECT'S VALUE CAN BE a matter of perception. One of the most intriguing pieces in the ROM's Plains Indian collection was described by its collector as a "cheap ornament" to attach to a horse bridle. This hardly captures the thought and effort that went into the piece, pictured above, collected from the Bloods, a division of the Blackfoot Indians. This group, which formerly subsisted by hunting buffalo on horseback in southern Alberta along the Montana border, developed complex practices centred on the well-being and performance of their horses, including a powerful horse medicine cult. Practitioners constructed bridle charms to make a horse lively in the Riding Big Dance, to protect it in warfare, and to increase its speed and sure-footedness on the buffalo hunt. The charm's power rested largely in the pouches of medicine tied to the cross-stick; the feathers and fringe were secondary. Whether the medicine pouches were removed by the former owner or were never there, the ROM example is without them. One Blackfoot informant, Bad Old Man, suggested in 1919 that the bridle charm or "cross fringe stick" made to be tied to the "jaw strap of a horse bridle was just like sleigh bells, horse bonnets, or cougar skin saddle blankets—just decoration." Since there appears to be only one other such bridle decoration / charm in existence, we may never know for sure whether this particular piece was used as horse medicine or was simply decorative. The information connected to our artifacts is critical; the more we can learn about them, the greater their value.

—Arni Brownstone