



*While both of these masks came from Plains Indian sources, the mask on the right is clearly not of Plains Indian origin.*

## A Headdress Fit for a Horse?

When a colleague from the Denver Art Museum asked me for some information about the two Plains Indian horse masks in the ethnology collections of the Royal Ontario Museum, I discovered that one of the masks had a very unconventional design. Before any information could be passed on, I had to try to uncover its origins.

One mask is fully decorated with beadwork, with a motif that begins as a bolt of lightning flashing from each eye hole and ends in a stylized eagle claw. These elements relate to the thunderbird and invoke powers that could give strength and speed

to the horse. The mask, which dates to the turn of the century, belonged to Walter Ochapowace, former chief of the Ochapowace Cree Reserve in the Qu'Appelle Valley.

The unconventional mask, according to substantial documentation, was collected on the Blood Reserve of Southern Alberta in the late 19th century; however, it bears no reference to Plains Indian beliefs or manufacturing technique. It is constructed from quilted cloth and sheet brass, bound with Moroccan-style leather thongs.

While I continued to study the mask, the former ROM African gal-

leries came to mind and, in particular, a display case with artifacts from the Battle of Omdurman in Sudanic Africa. Among the artifacts were two examples of quilted head armour.

Given the diversity of the ROM collections and research, the staff of several departments were able to offer their help to correctly identify this perplexing artifact. Anu Liivandi of the Textiles Department found the quilted armour, which closely matched the horse mask in technique. Once a general place of origin had been established, Krzysztof Ciuk, an armour specialist in the

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West Asian Department, referred me to a book illustrating an artifact that was an exact match. The accompanying text described the item as a chanfron used in Sudan in the late 19th century as armour "said to be for camels." Next I consulted Susan Woodward of the Mammalogy Department who placed a camel skull next to a horse skull. The chanfron precisely fit the camel but was awkward on the horse.

Given that the chanfron was designed for camels in late 19th-century Sudan, its presence on the Blood Reserve would seem extremely peculiar; however, there are some possible explanations. In the second half of the 19th century, camels were introduced to North America for various purposes. Between 1856 and 1860, the United States cavalry experimented with a camel corps for transportation and for battling Indians in the southwest, and between 1862 and 1867 at least two caravans were used for transportation, not far from the Blood Indian territory in

Montana. Camels also served as transportation during the Cariboo gold rush in British Columbia.

Although there is little likelihood that camel armour was used for these ventures, there was at least one opportunity for Canadian Indians to travel to Africa in the 1800s. Not long before the Battle of Omdurman in 1898, Lord Wolseley set out to rescue Major-General Gordon at Khartoum. To assist him in his quest, he recruited a large contingent of Indians from as far west as Winnipeg to serve as voyageurs on the boat trip down the Nile. Perhaps the ROM's chanfron started its journey to the Blood Reserve as spoils of war. Whatever the actual story may be, the chanfron must make one more trip, this time from the Plains Indian to the North African storage area of the ethnology collections.

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