

## PIPE BAG

The oldest surviving Native American bags, documented “tobacco bags,” were collected early in the eighteenth century in the Great lakes region, probably from the Ojibway, neighbors of the Dakota. The pouch section of these bags was made from two pieces of hide sewn together and painted with a different complex, geometrical design on each side. Typically, a decorative panel of netted quillwork with a short fringe was attached below the pouch. There are several comparable examples with unpainted pouch sections and netted panels (Brasser 2009: 97; Feest 1987; Feest 2007: 40). The shape and proportions of these bags may be compared to late-nineteenth-century Lakota tobacco bags, with the netted panels on the early examples equivalent to the quill-wrapped rawhide slat panels on later bags. The early nineteenth century saw the introduction of a narrow horizontal band of bead or quill embroidery terminating the pouch section, later evolving into a larger oblong panel toward the end of the century and usually with different designs back and front. Meanwhile, the fringe increased in length. Whereas the seams joining the sides of the early painted pouch sections were sometimes finished with a narrow line of colored quills, the later bags featured more predominant beaded bands. The early bags were closed with a drawstring, and perhaps the band of rolled beadwork at the opening of later bags is a vestigial reference to that feature.

The Jesuit missionary Paul Le Jeune noted in 1633 that the Montagnais of Quebec referred to their tobacco bags made from eviscerated small animals as *Castipitagan* or a “small bag squeezed to keep closed.” The Ojibway used the same term for their tobacco bags until at least the beginning of the twentieth century. Generally, the tobacco bag held a pipe, tobacco, fire steel, and tinder. Like most small Indian bags, they were worn tucked into the belt, substituting as pockets. In the late nineteenth century Plains Indians wore European clothing for everyday wear. However, on ceremonial occasions they again tucked their highly decorated tobacco bags into the belt or held them in their hands as part of their status-signifying regalia.

At some point in the latter half of the nineteenth century the proportions of tobacco bags across much of the Plains became fairly uniform. In this regard the relative scale of fringe, quilled rawhide lattice work, beaded panel, and hide sleeve sections on the illustrated tobacco bag is typical. However, the presence of quilled rawhide slats, arched lane-stitch beadwork, and other features suggests Lakota origins. Generally speaking, beaded panels on the majority of tobacco bags featured geometric abstract designs, while pictorial imagery, other than floral motifs, was quite rare. Pictorial motifs in Lakota bags almost always recorded deeds in war.

Plains Indian men customarily displayed records of their war deeds through “honor marks” painted on their clothing and bodies. Typically men, not women, depicted war imagery. Tobacco bags bearing representations of men’s war exploits embroidered by Pawnee, Cheyenne, and Lakota women are among the rare exceptions. Such bags displayed severed heads representing enemies killed, U-shaped hoofprints standing for horses captured, wound marks, and hands. At least ten tribes routinely depicted the hand as a war honor mark, and most commonly it signified grappling with an enemy. Clark Wissler learned in 1902 from his field informants that among the Lakota red hands stood for hand-to-hand combat, blue hands signified the capturing of women and children, yellow hands represented the capture of horses—yellow because tawny or dun-colored horses were most prized. He was also told that when tobacco bags bore military symbolism, the red-dyed quillwork slats signified flowing blood. Transverse bands were conceived as roads or trails. A red band embroidered on a woman’s object signified “the trail on which a woman travels,” that is, her childbearing years. In context with the imagery on the tobacco bag, the bands may signify war trails. In general, there are two central tendencies in Native American art, the decorative and symbolic, and it is often impossible to separate them out. While it seems certain that the motifs decorating this tobacco bag are essentially symbolic, their interpretation is open to question since the meaning of such imagery was both fixed and idiosyncratic (Wissler 1904).

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Pipe bag, Lakota, ca. 1870–1880

Hide, glass beads, porcupine quills, pigments  
l. 40 cm (with fringe), w. 13 cm

Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde, Leiden 3158-9  
(purchased from art dealer Leendert van Lier, Amsterdam, 1954)



## PLAINSMAN JACKET

In the nineteenth century Plains Indian men fiercely competed for status within their tribal communities. In ceremonies men signified their rank by the type of clothing and regalia they wore. In their trade and peace rituals leaders followed the custom of undressing and putting on each other's clothing. A similar custom was adopted into trade rituals between Europeans and Indians. Subsequently, flamboyant woolen military coats, called chief's coats, were stocked by European traders and became popular among Plains Indian men early in the nineteenth century. Some men would customize their "store-bought" coats by adding decorative elements, such as quilled or beaded strips and fringes, normally found on their traditional Native ceremonial "warshirts." In the other direction, Europeans returned home from the frontier wearing Native-made hide coats or light jackets commemorating their adventuresome travels on the frontier. These were hybrid forms, modeled after European structural patterns and richly accented with Native decorative motifs (Brasser 1985, 2000, Hanson 1982).

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century the northwestern plains saw longer-term European visitors. Historical photographs show many of these individuals, ranging from policemen to missionaries, posing in light jackets cut in the contemporary Euro-American style for men of action, but made of smoked, Indian-dressed hide, generously fringed and beaded in floral designs. By their dress these men identified themselves as plainsmen, yet generally were not permanent inhabitants of the region. Permanent dwellers were less likely to own such clothing.

Contemporaneous photographs of Indians in everyday circumstances show them in cloth shirts and trousers. In southern Alberta Natives adopted this clothing for a number of reasons. Except for the Stoney, Indian people had limited access to animal hides, including those of the beef cows routinely butchered by the government for food rations. Their clothes arrived in charity bundles sent by church groups from the east. However, long before Indian people appreciated that cloth could be more practical and comfortable than hide (Dempsey 1995). Nonetheless, Indian women continued to make bead-embroidered, traditional clothing and regalia for ceremonial occasions. The late 1880s were difficult times for First Nations, as the government sharply reduced food rations and Indian farmers encountered poor crops. To make ends meet, Indian women traveled off the reserve to local ranches and stores to exchange beadwork for the necessities of life.

Around the beginning of 1886 Meinard Sprenger acquired his Alberta ranch some 35 kilometers west of the North Blackfoot Reserve, and in 1890 he donated a dozen Blackfoot items, including this jacket, to the Zeeland Society. Unlike the fitted cut of the European's plainsman jackets, the shape of the Indian's ceremonial shirt, or warshirt, was loose and untailored in the first half of the nineteenth century. The body was made from two whole animal skins

and the sleeves from the front section of an additional skin. The four sets of legs were normally left to hang down. Toward the end of the nineteenth century Indians more commonly trimmed the legs and their shirts took on a cleaner, more fitted look, closer to European models. Throughout the century warshirts displayed quilled or beaded strips attached to the sleeves and over the shoulders, pairs of embroidered rosettes, and fringework.

Sprenger's shirt has a complex history. Its overall cut, positioning of fringe, inserted back yoke, abbreviated collar, inset sleeves, single breast pocket, and diminutive fireman's jacket-type bib typify the European's plainsman jacket. It is made of smoked hide, almost certainly from a moose, and hand-sewn. As a rule, the Blackfoot did not make European plainsmen jackets, nor smoke their hides, and rarely used moosehide. However, the Stoney and the more distant Cree produced and sold considerable numbers of these jackets. The beaded hide rosettes and sleeve strips on Sprenger's shirt were added later in imitation of the Indian warshirt. The sleeve strips are identifiable by their size as former legging strips, and stylistically their beaded designs point to Blackfoot, Stoney, or Tsuu T'ina (Sarcee) origins. The rosettes were apparently cut out from a larger fully beaded panel removed from an unknown object. While many tribes beaded abstract floral rosettes, the wild rose colors and composition of Sprenger's rondels are typically Cree. In all likelihood, it was Sprenger's idea, or a previous European owner's, to add these to the jacket to make it look "more Indian." Based on location, Sprenger likely commissioned a Blackfoot woman to enliven his jacket with beadwork salvaged from older items found on her reserve (Brownstone 2003).

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Plainsman jacket, Stoney or Cree,  
with northern Plains beadwork, ca. 1875–1885

Hide, glass beads  
l. 72 cm, w. of bodice 50 cm  
Zeeuws Museum, Middelburg B191-1  
(Meinard Sprenger collection,  
donated to the Zeeland Society, 1890)



## TABBED PIPE BAG

According to their social mores, Lakota women were encouraged to be industrious in the production of quill- and bead-decorated goods. These objects were not only for the immediate family and home, but also for the “give away” ceremonies that played a prominent role in Lakota life. No doubt there was much competition for social recognition as a gift giver and for producing numerous finely decorated objects. These forces must have been very strong, for the amount of decorative work produced by Lakota women in the early reservation period was prodigious (Lyford 1983), earning them the reputation for beading and quilling almost everything in sight. Their work is marked by creative innovation, and the exuberant quillworked tobacco bag illustrated here is an outstanding example.

Clark Wissler, curator at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, who conducted field research among the Lakota in 1902, considered tobacco bags to be the high point of Sioux decorative art. Indeed, Lakota tobacco bags were so highly coveted that today museums hold numerous examples collected from a wide variety of Plains Indian tribes. Tobacco bags were considered by both the women who made them and the men who used them to be works of art. Wissler commented on tobacco bags that “their practical value is *nil*,” perhaps because their function was largely ceremonial. Nonetheless, when we open a museum drawer full of tobacco bags over a hundred years later, the pungent odor of tobacco and smoke immediately tells us that many of these containers were indeed more than simply status symbols.

Franz Boas and his students, like Wissler, were keenly interested in learning what meaning might underlie the abstract geometric designs found in Plains Indian decoration. The basic geometrical design elements that crafts-women employed at the turn of the century had been in circulation for a number of generations and acquired more or less standardized pattern-names, based on real life objects to which they bore a passing semblance. The craftswomen worked without sketches, composing sometimes complex combinations of motifs within their minds. Functionally, pattern-names perhaps lent greater stability and memorability to those mental images, as well as provided a *lingua franca* enabling women to discuss their respective projects.

Early-twentieth-century anthropologists routinely asked craftswomen whether their designs told stories. Periodically, women connected the design motifs into pictorial narratives, usually revolving around real life rather than mystical events. However, in such cases it was not known whether the stories were preconceived or invented to accommodate the interviewer. Women sometimes received complex designs in their dreams, through the intercession of a cultural heroine who was one of two twins. While dream designs are not formalistically different from awake-composed designs,

they underscore the Lakota women’s tendency to view their designs as having symbolic connections and sacred origins. Nonetheless, the primary motive behind abstract geometric designs was to create something of beauty (Grinnell 1923: 168; Wissler 1922: 19–20; Wissler 1904: 239).

Although lacking documentation on its origins, scholars are certain that the tobacco bag illustrated here was made by a Lakota woman around 1890. The quills worked in narrow bands are dyed in the three colors similar to those long employed by the Lakota. Based on Wissler’s field interviews, the following pattern-names may be given to the motifs found on both sides of the bag, from top to bottom: tipi with door, vertebrae, and dragonflies. The skirt of wrapped rawhide slats immediately below the yellow painted hide was a Lakota specialty, creatively added to all kinds of objects, including drinking cups.

Its two pending tabs bring to mind a rare type of bag from the Algonquian neighbors of the Lakota in the eighteenth century. All the fifteen extant examples collected between 1790 and 1820 are oblong in shape and feature dual tabs, sometimes separated by tin cone-tipped thongs (Feest 1997; Brasser 2000: 65; Phillips in Fognell 2010: 28–29). There are perhaps twenty surviving, late-nineteenth-century Lakota tabbed tobacco bags and, based on several historical photographs and drawings by Indians, they are associated with the regalia of Lakota camp leaders or *wakichunze* (Mike Cowdrey and Kingsley Bray, personal communication). The example at hand stands apart, however, as its general form and size is more highly reminiscent of the early tabbed bags.

Arni Brownstone

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Tabbed pipe bag, Lakota, ca. 1890

Hide, porcupine quills, metal cones, horsehair, pigments  
54 x 17 cm

Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde, Leiden 4075-1  
(donated in 1965 by art dealer Richard L. Stolper)

