

Sacred Protection

Shields of the Plains and Southwest in The University Museum's Collections

The University Museum has a number of feathered shields used by Indians of the Plains and Southwest. This photographic gallery of 19th century examples is excerpted from an article by H.U. Hall in *The Museum Journal* 17(1):36-61, 1926 (now out of print).—Ed.



In his article, Hall introduces the shield with a brief history of its use:

"The round shield or target is the characteristic New World shield. Other forms occur, but among aboriginal American users of shields, this type is predominant, and the geographical limits of its distribution suggest that its use spread from one center, probably Mexico. All the shields dealt with here are made of hide, which was the only material used for shields among the Indians of the Plains; their neighbors of the southwest, the Pueblo tribes, made their round shields of wicker and of a heavy fabric of cotton as well as of thick rawhide. In both regions the shields bore symbolical painted devices, as they did also in Mexico.

"The indigenous animals which afforded hide of suitable thickness were the elk and the buffalo. In later times horsehide and cowhide came into use. The introduction of firearms might have been expected to render the rawhide shield obsolete, but the protection afforded by it had probably been from very early times conceived as largely of a magical nature, and the shield long continued to be a part of the equipment of the mounted warrior armed with musket or rifle. Its early use in ceremonies of a magico-religious character also ensured its survival for similar purposes after its abandonment by the warrior in the field. Writing in 1907 of the Dakota, Wissler says, 'Practically no shields of buffalo hide are to be found in the hands of the surviving Dakota; but in social and religious ceremonies, models or shield-covers of buckskin or cloth, upon which are painted the designs formerly placed on shields, are often used' (1907:22)."

Figure 1 [Hall's Fig. 6]. "Shield cover showing painted device. The circular ornament [is] in red; the strokes arranged in radiating rows about it are yellow. The upper star is red, the lower yellow outlined in red. A bunch of small feathers and thongs hangs from the center of the upper star. The field is divided into two semicircular areas, that which includes the red sun disc being yellow, the other white. Perhaps from the Dakota. Said to have belonged to Sitting Bull."

UM 21390; Dia. 43.0 cm

Hall points out that shields, on account of their circular shape, presented special artistic challenges to their designers:

"Almost inevitably...the shape of the field to be decorated imposed upon the designers the nature of their main designs. In nearly all cases these are based on a simple analysis of the circle, and a repetition of the outline of the given circular field. Fig. [2], which is to be regarded as a modified circle, has a central dark circular area from which issue short rays terminating in dots, the latter forming a broken line concentric, in intention, at least, with the outer circumference of the shield. Thongs passed through holes in the hide of which the shield is made at right angles to each other

form discontinuous lines cutting each other at the center of the shield and dividing the whole area into four sectors....

"Even where details or main designs are not obviously based on the circle, its influence...may sometimes be traced. . . . In a case like the bird of Fig. [3], in which there is a determined attempt at realism, [this] influence can, I think, be traced in the bold curves of the outline of head, beak and talons, and the sweeping curve of the wings; while the legs are disposed as if the designer wished to make sure that they would fall well within the circle which might be completed by joining and producing the curves of the outlines of the wings and beak."

Figure 2 [Hall's Fig. 7]. "Shield of the White Mountain Apache. The decoration is chiefly in very dark green. Between the rays from the smaller circle are short strokes in red. The dark rays proceed from the heads of upholsterers' tacks driven through the two thicknesses of hide along the circumference of the smaller circle. Between every two of the dark dots along the border of the shield is a red stroke flanked by two dark green ones. The ends of the red flannel band which carries the feathers are fringed with slender cones of thin sheet iron."

UM 18627; Dia. 53.4 cm



Figure 3 [Hall's Fig. 12]. "Crow shield with buckskin cover and 'medicine.' The medicine comprises a disc of leather covered with red flannel surrounded by a circle of beadwork in light and dark blue and yellow, from which depends a tress of human hair; and a plummetlike object (navel amulet?), covered with beadwork in pink, green, light and dark blue bands, to which is attached a piece of birdskin. The crow is painted in brown, with a green beak. The vertical strokes at the upper and lower circumference are in green, the wavy line (lightning symbol?) in red. The shield is said to have been the property of a certain Boy-that-Grabs, captain of Indian police on a Crow agency in Montana." It was collected in 1888.

UM 38562; Dia. 56.2 cm



Figure 4 (opposite page). A painted buffalo robe of the Plains Indians, probably Dakota, showing shields in use. A quillwork stripe of red, blue, and undyed white is stitched to the center of the robe with buffalo sinew, as are quillwork eye and ear appliques. The battle scenes, painted in red, white, black, brown, yellow, green, and blue, record the exploits of the warrior who presumably made and wore the blanket. Hall dated the robe on stylistic grounds to the early 19th century.

UM 10721; see Hall 1926a and frontispiece to issue. L. 197.4 cm, greatest W. 195.8 cm

Hall points out that a shield's efficacy lay as much or more in its supernatural or "medicinal" power as in its physical properties. Another Museum curator, Frank Speck, explains how the buffalo robe illustrated here is misleading as an historical document (Fernberger and Speck 1938:175-176):

"Among the mounted Plains Indians, the shield was never worn on the arm in battle. This arm position is evident, nevertheless, in the pictures reproduced from a buffalo robe described by Hall [1926a:5,35]. In connection with these pictures, one may raise the question as to whether this position of the shield was not partly or even wholly an artifact of the artistic treatment of the subject—a depiction of incidents in a series of Indian battles. For the purpose of such a record, it was important to show the heraldic designs on the shields in order to identify the combatant individuals. Due to the limitations of the pattern of their art tradition, all of the figures are shown in profile. Hence, if they are to be seen at all, the shields would have been worn on the arm in the picture. And it will be noted that all of the individuals here depicted with a shield are armed only

with the lance. It is difficult to imagine how the shield could be carried on the arm if the bow and arrow or the rifle were employed as offensive weapons. [Most] . . . specimens of Plains Indian shields are provided with a long leather thong or bandolier for suspension around the neck and shoulder and were thus suspended across the abdomen or across the back.

"This position for carrying the shield again emphasizes the aspect of magical protection which the object afforded, inasmuch as the warrior was never expected to turn his back to the enemy during combat. Thus a shield, worn in this position, could not be expected to protect by physical interposition between the projectile and the wearer, and so could protect only by its magical powers. And it may be pointed out further that a shield, if worn by a horseman and suspended in this dorsal position, particularly with its loosely tied appendages, would tend to swing away from the body of the wearer with the movements of the horse. Such a moving target, swinging away from the body of the wearer, would have the psychological effect of diverting the aim of the opponent, and would indeed have a certain amount of actual protective value."



If the shield's efficacy was largely supernatural, then where did that power reside? Hall questions how important the shield was in itself:

"It does not seem clear whether the rawhide disc in itself was endowed with any part of the magical power that inhered in the whole apparatus with its painted cover and attachments of feathers, furs, and other pendent charms, or that, like a Congo fetish figure, the power resided in the attachments and was communicated to the object to which they were attached only so long as they remained in place. Of the twelve shields with which we are here concerned, eight have a painted device on the shield itself; one other, also without cover, has for its only decoration, apart from traces of color, thongs passed through slits in the two

layers of hide of which it is made so as to form a number of circles concentric with the circumference of the shield, the primary object of this contrivance being evidently to hold the two layers of hide together. To the shields themselves or to their covers feathers are often attached, usually forming a fringe, which, falling from the upper part of the circumference, may obscure or completely hide the painted decoration of the shield or cover. Sometimes the feathers are attached to the shield or cover directly; sometimes indirectly by means of a band of woollen stuff, usually red, to which they are fastened. [This] Shoshone shield shows a good example of the kind of feathered streamer which is represented as an attachment [to] some of the shields on the painted buffalo robe [shown in Fig. 4]."



Figure 5a,b [Hall's Figs. 1, 2]. "Ceremonial shield of the Shoshone. [In Figure 5b the] upper row of feathers [is] parted to show the device in red, . . . white and blue."

UM NA 3508; Dia. 48.7 cm

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