



**Violin Case**

Unknown Brulé Lakota artist

1899

31 ½" x 16 ½" x 11"

T0080

<https://collections.fenimoreart.org/objects/909/violin-case?ctx=d9b5a9356736e54bea147acb79b44b5815ecfbb3&idx=0>

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John Paul Rangel posits that, through the refashioning of foreign ideas, influences, and materials, Native artists and makers “claim discursive space and assert culture stories, values, languages, knowledge systems, traditions and histories.” Rangel specifically terms this practice the *Indigenization of materials*. [1] Thinking through Rangel, I want to turn to a beaded violin case from 1899 held in the Fenimore’s Thaw Collection to demonstrate how its Lakota creator Indigenized the media of commercial goods as well as American and Christian symbols in order to support and celebrate their family, leisure, and culture during a moment of intense federal reservation policies.

Using common Lakota beadwork techniques of lane stitch and overlay, the artist applied glass bead applique to four pieces of deer hide and then nailed them to the exterior of a commercially-manufactured, wooden violin case, similar to one found in the collections of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History (Figure 1). [2] For further reinforcement, the artist additionally sewed the hides’ edges to cotton strips that decorate the case’s interior. Five types of seed beads—green, whiteheart red, yellow, blue, and faceted—combine to create a variety of motifs against a white beaded ground, such as a three-string violin, American flags, stars, and crosses as well as geometric designs that Emil Her Many Horses called “triangle-like” and “fork-like.” [3]

The beadwork designs also include the initials “GS” and an inscription on the back of the case, reading “GEORGE/SCHMiDT/HORSE/CREEK/DEC/25/1899” (Figure 2). From this information, we can assume that George Schmidt lived in the Horse Creek community (located in the Rosebud Reservation) in 1899 and evidently received the beaded case as Christmas gift. In 1996, Ted Brassler wrote for the Fenimore’s records that Schmidt, a German immigrant, received the case from its maker, his Brulé Lakota wife. Yet, Brassler left behind no citations for his claims. [4] Brassler may have confused the German immigrant Schmidt with his mixed German and Lakota son, George Andrew Schmidt, Jr. (1872-1944), who was a well-known resident of Horse Creek in 1899, as documented in U.S. Censuses and local Episcopal Mission Records. Furthermore, according to his friends and neighbors in Mellette County, South Dakota, Schmidt, Jr. established a home on his allotment in 1899. And as homesteaders continued settling in the area, he often entertained the community with violin music and dance lessons. Schmidt, Jr.’s Brulé Lakota wife, Elizabeth “One Feather Woman” Little Dog (b. 1874), may have beaded the case, as Brassler suggests, yet there is no evidence identifying her as a skilled beadworker. [5]

This violin case corresponds to a prominent moment for beading in Lakota communities. As the U.S. Federal Government instituted reservation policies in the 1880s, Lakota makers continued to value European beads as artistic productivity increased and the sale of art and beadwork bolstered Indigenous economies, with women dominating the creation of beaded works. Furthermore, Native dancing persisted despite federal prohibitions, prompting Lakota beadworkers to keep up with regalia needs and to produce works for sale to spectators. [6] Yet, in addition to the sale of such works, gifting predominated production motivations. Personally beaded and gifted objects exchanged between loved ones reinforced ties of reciprocity and togetherness. While the American government too prohibited certain cultural practices of generosity, giveaways and the gifting of beaded works made their way into sanctioned Fourth of July and Christian celebrations as a mean of upholding the continuity of these Lakota principles of generosity. [7] In spite of the cultural restrictions that accompanied U.S. reservation policies,

Lakota women, such as the creator of this violin case, further entrenched the Indigenization of commercial goods and European beads in order to continue their expressive practices as well as to personally and financially support their loved ones.

And while the violin case demonstrates the Indigenization of settler commercial goods and beads, the object additionally displays the Indigenization of symbols through its employment of the American flag motif. Similar to the violin case, American flag motifs were abundant throughout contemporaneous Lakota beadwork, as one can see among several beaded objects in the Thaw Collection (Figure 3). The case highlights numerous Lakota designs that employ geometric symbols like the aforementioned “triangle-like” and “fork-like” motifs. Howard Bad Hand suggests that the American flag, due to its geometric construction and loaded significance, readily complements Lakota visual lexicons and adapts easily to the beadwork medium. [8]

Several scholars have puzzled over the significance of American flags in Lakota beadwork. Toby Herbst and Joel Kopp suggest that this symbolic appropriation of the motif occurred in the nineteenth century as a protective measure, visually reminding Americans of ongoing agreements and warding off the potential hostility of intolerant settlers. [9] Bad Hand emphasizes the practice of counting coup and capturing the flag as a prize of bravery and glory. [10] David W. Penney highlights that, as the federal government attempted to repress Lakota religious and social practices in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the United States concurrently promoted patriotic displays and celebrations within reservation communities. Adorning garments and objects with the flag, especially for Fourth of July celebrations, allowed for the covert enactment of Lakota social practices and ceremonies under the guise of American patriotism. [11] Hence, the addition of the American flag on this violin case may be interpreted as an action of subversively appeasing colonial authority while simultaneously celebrating Lakota knowledge, adaptability, and perseverance. [12]

At the end of the nineteenth century and during a moment of intense U.S. colonial and prohibitive policies, the studied violin case arose as a testament to Lakota adaptability and continuity. By incorporating the commercially made wooden violin case, European glass beads, and American flag motif into their own expressive processes, the artist Indigenized colonial materials and visual languages for the purposes of maintaining and asserting Lakota practices of reciprocity, celebration, and survivability.

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[1] John Paul Rangel, “Mapping Indigenous Space and Place,” in *Making History: IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts*, ed. Nancy Marie Mithlo (Albuquerque, N.M.: University of New Mexico Press, 2020), 46-47.

[2] Lane stitch and overlay techniques identified according to the knowledge gained through beading workshops organized by Emil Her Many Horses at the 2022 Otsego Institute.

- [3] Emil Her Many Horses, "Horse Gear of the Great Plains," in *Plains Indian Art of the Early Reservation Era: The Donald Danforth Jr. Collection at the Saint Louis Art Museum*, ed. Jill Ahlberg Yohe (St. Louis, MO: Saint Louis Art Museum, 2016), 201.
- [4] Eva Fognell and Alexander Brier, eds., *Art of the North American Indians: The Thaw Collection at the Fenimore Art Museum*, 2nd ed. (Cooperstown, N.Y.: Fenimore Art Museum, 2016), 159. Thank you, Eva Fognell, for helping me locate the citational information on this catalogue entry.
- [5] United States Census Bureau, "1900 United States Federal Census," Census (United States Census Bureau, 1900), Ancestry.com. United States Census Bureau; Rosebud Agency, "Rosebud Agency Episcopal Mission Records," Church Records (Rosebud Indian Reservation, South Dakota: Rosebud Agency, January 15, 1891), Ancestry.com. Mellette County Centennial Committee, *Mellette County South Dakota 1911-1961* (White River, South Dakota: Mellette County Centennial Committee, 1961), 14-77, <http://persi.heritagequestonline.com/hqoweb/library/do/books/results/shortcitation?urn=urn:proquest:US;glhbooks;Genealogy-glh42044293;-1;-1;&letter=M>.
- [6] David W. Penney, "The North American Plains as Native Place," in *Plains Indian Art of the Early Reservation Era: The Donald Danforth Jr. Collection at the Saint Louis Art Museum*, ed. Jill Ahlberg Yohe (St. Louis, MO: Saint Louis Art Museum, 2016), 30-31.
- [7] Penney, "The North American Plains as Native Place," 27-28; Catherine Berlo and Arthur Amiotte, "Generosity, Trade, and Reciprocity among the Lakota: Three Moments in Time," in *Plains Indian Art of the Early Reservation Era: The Donald Danforth Jr. Collection at the Saint Louis Art Museum*, ed. Jill Ahlberg Yohe (St. Louis, MO: Saint Louis Art Museum, 2016), 43-49.
- [8] Howard Bad Hand, "The American Flag in Lakota Tradition," in *The Flag in American Indian Art*, ed. Toby Herbst and New York State Historical Association (Cooperstown, N.Y.: New York State Historical Association, 1993), 12.
- [9] Toby Herbst and Joel Kopp, "The Grandfather's Flag," in *The Flag in American Indian Art*, ed. Toby Herbst and New York State Historical Association (Cooperstown, N.Y.: New York State Historical Association, 1993), 16-25.
- [10] Howard Bad Hand, "The American Flag in Lakota Tradition," 12-13.
- [11] David W. Penney, "The Horse as Symbol: Equine Representations in Plains Pictographic Art," in *Visions of the People: A Pictorial History of Plains Indian Life*, ed. Evan M Maurer (Minneapolis, Minn.: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1992), 78.
- [12] I would like to thank Clementine Bordeaux for encouraging me to consider the adaption of the flag motif as something beyond American celebration and patriotism.

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**Figures**



*Figure 1: Violin case, unknown American maker, n.d., wood, paper, and metal. 2017.3021.048, Smithsonian National Museum of American History.*



*Figure 2: Violin case, unknown Brulé Lakota artist, 1899, commercially manufactured wooden violin case, native tanned hide, glass beads, cotton cloth. T0080, Fenimore Art Museum.*





*Figure 3: Shirt, unknown Teton Lakota maker, c. 1890, deer hide, paint, hair, porcupine quills, glass beads. T0072, Fenimore Art Museum.*