



Parfleche
Unknown Cheyenne artist
ca. 1830
W: 19"; L: 27"
T0051
[URL coming soon]

By Stacy Ernst (Carlton University)

Despite their function or beauty, the objects surrounding us are easily taken for granted. The bag you carry everyday is first and foremost utilitarian, but what makes it meaningful? Is it the materials used, the knowledge it enacts, the role it plays in ceremony, or, in the case of the Cheyenne parfleche I worked with, the role it plays in everyday life? These were just some of the questions I explored during the 2015 Otsego Institute Workshop.

Parfleche containers are utilitarian items. They were made in four styles: flat case, cylinder, box and envelope. Due possibly to their practicality, envelope-style parfleches, like this one, were frequently made. They could carry a variety of items from clothes, to food, to medicines. The malleable hide construction made them lightweight and waterproof—two extremely important qualities for nomadic peoples of the Plains region.

While we cannot know for certain how parfleche container making began, curator Gaylord Torrence, an authority on the subject, positions it as part of the tradition of hide painting and birch bark container making practiced by the Woodland peoples of the northeast and western Great Lakes regions.¹ As colonization forced these people westward to the Plains, they brought these knowledges with them. An unknown individual made this parfleche; because labour was divided along gender lines, it is likely that a woman made it. Hide preparation and container making was done by females.²

This parfleche dates to approximately 1830. There are three different phases of parfleche painting defined by the colours used.³ The exclusive use of red, green and black, as well as the black outlining that is used in this design, is hallmark of the first phase. A common aesthetic strategy among Cheyenne artists was to have the design develop from a painted

border and the inclusion of small design elements. This is the case here; the design emerges from a border that features small square voids.

Otsego presents a wonderful opportunity to benefit from the faculty's wealth of knowledge and participate in the many conversations huddled around objects in the storage room and display cases. The conversation that developed between David Penney and Emil her Many Horses around case 32 – where this parfleche is displayed – was over whether or not it is Cheyenne made. Overall, the design has a heavy quality; Cheyenne artists favoured a more delicate approach. Though the record mentions Southern Arapaho, Kiowa, and Plateau nations using similar aesthetic motifs, it is identified as Cheyenne. There are clear Cheyenne treatments, but there are just as many variances.

The hourglass motif, and the small units that are voids rather than painted areas, are more common with Arapaho designs (comparative example: Torrence pg. 128). The motif of a cross or flower enclosed in a circle repeated six times along the horizontal axis is uncommon. However, the Blackfeet used a cross motif, though theirs were thinner and more clearly a cross (comparative examples: Torrence pg. 186 and 187).

This parfleche's most striking feature is the horizontal emphasis of the composition. Often the designs on envelope parfleche are vertical, thus accentuating the elongated shape of the container. Variations on this arrangement have been seen among the Crow (comparative example: Torrence pg. 219, though it lacks a heavy border), but generally speaking these are anomalies. The horizontal arrangement of this design creates a dynamic tension between the verticality of the object and of the horizontality of the painting.

Parfleche containers were not only made for personal use, but were also traded and gifted. This contributes to the problem of stylistically identifying the parfleche with certainty. This design demonstrates that the artist drew from a variety of sources – Arapaho, Blackfeet, and Crow – suggesting wide-ranging experiences. Thus, this parfleche is meaningful not only because it carried things efficiently, but also because it is a material manifestation of the connections its maker may have had with other people and things.

¹ Gaylord Torrence, *The American Indian Parfleche: a Tradition of Abstract Painting*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994) 30.

² *Ibid.*, 24 – 25.

³ *Ibid.*, 24.