



Boy's Gauntlets

Unknown Lakota artist

ca. 1900-1925

W: 7"; L: 12"

T0359a,b

<https://collections.fenimoreart.org/objects/995/gauntlets?ctx=502265ef9009e051dbbf2b2cc8496b946aba25a4&idx=0>

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The construction of these boy's leather gloves was a three-step process. The artist first attained commercially made gauntlet style gloves. I noticed that the gloves seem to be peeling and splitting in a unique way. Based on my observations, I speculate that these gloves may have been made of a bonded leather product. Having no expertise in this area, I cannot say definitively this is the case.

The second step in the artist's process was to alter the cuff portion of the glove by cutting away most of the original cuff and affixing a stiff, larger, cuff shaped piece in its place. This new material was covered with what is probably waxed duck cloth. By doing this, the artist allowed for flare at the top of the glove and also provided a stable surface to which they could apply a substantial amount of beads. Again, I can't be completely certain that the fabric is waxed duck cloth. However, this kind of cloth was widely available and in use from the early 1800s until about 1950.

It would seem that we are dealing with a very inventive artist that could make something beautiful and durable out of less expensive materials. Through their ingenuity, they ensured a suitable and admirable presentation of their family member at public events.

One of the reasons I was so interested in these gauntlets was the prominent display of the flags. The other reason was the equally prominent display of the swastika symbol. These combined elements on a child's glove perplexed me. In considering the American flags, we have several possible reasons for their inclusion.

Perhaps the maker wished them to bear a symbol that was tolerated by an otherwise intolerant government. Or maybe the maker saw the flag as a symbol of power. Government sanctioned Fourth of July celebrations offered Lakota people ways to come together under watchful eyes. So these gloves may have been created for just such a celebration. Toby Herbst and Joel Kopp remind us in their book "The Flag in American Indian Art" that "*The Lakota tradition of creating special gifts of clothing for infants and children also appeared in these Fourth of July giveaways.*"¹

Whatever the reason may be, during the early 1900s the flag symbology was ubiquitous. Native people were inundated with this icon, which was visible in urban environments, forts, advertising, and Wild West shows.² It seems natural that this familiar form would find its way into the artistry, clothing and regalia of Lakota people.

Even more perplexing is the "swastika" symbol. To gain insight as to why this symbol appeared, I tried desperately to find a reliable source linking this symbol to the Lakota people. I was familiar with this symbol's use in the Southwest and especially among the Navajo, who call it a

¹ Toby Herbst and Joel Kopp, *The Flag in American Indian Art*, (Cooperstown, NY: New York State Historical Association, 1993) 22.

² Herbst and Kopp, *The Flag in American Indian Art*, 18.

whirling log. But besides this very clear Navajo connection, I couldn't find any research that tied it directly to Lakota storytelling.

I contacted Dr. Adrianna Greci Greene, Curator of the Indigenous Arts of the Americas at the Fralin Museum of Art, University of Virginia to ask her opinion on the swastika sign on the gloves. She had this to say: "*I would be comfortable disputing the date [of the gloves] ...and proffer that these are made with specific reference to WW2, expressing war honors in having fought[against Nazi German] ...that explains the pairing with the flags. [A lot] of this kind of reference [took place] for veterans coming home after the war.*"³ Dr. David Penney, Associate Director of Museum Scholarship at the National Museum of the American Indian, adds "We also know that flags were used as symbols of veteran service during both the First and Second World wars. The swastika as a symbol referring to a vanquished enemy parallels the use of Crow warrior heads with their distinctive hair styles as symbols of victory over enemies a few generations earlier. So they [the glove and flag] may go together as a symbol of service during WWII."⁴

Another possible inference we could make is a marriage between a Navajo and Lakota person, or we could simply return to the thought that this symbol did also translate into abundance for Lakota people, but we have yet to uncover reliable references.

Next steps would be to ascertain if these gloves are indeed made from a bonded leather product, and if so, learn when that product was available on the market. Then we would either be able to dispute or confirm the creation date. If we are sure the gloves were made before World War II, it would affect our interpretation of the use of the swastika with the flag.

In closing, it is important that Native American scholars have a place like the Otsego Institute that lets such close observation of the objects, because this kind of exploration allows for deep and challenging questions to be raised. Having the ability to be surrounded by the collection while we received other information from the attending scholars was particularly inspiring for me. I came back to my job hoping to motivate my museum to create an open storage room like the one at Otsego. It's a wonderful incubation room, where community members can come together to conduct art activities, language lessons, or other community actions all the while surrounded by their ancestors.

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Bibliography

Herbst, Toby and Joel Kopp. *The Flag in American Indian Art*. Cooperstown, NY: New York State Historical Association, 1993.

³ Adrianna Greci Greene, Ph.D., text message to the author, September 23, 2017.

⁴ David Penney, Ph.D., comment to author, November 12, 2017.